ABSTRACT

Absent Witness: The Politics of Fiction in the Postcolony, Algeria 1962-2003 sets out a history of Algerian literary fiction as a critique of state violence in the late-twentieth century. Modern Maghrebi literature emerged in conditions of colonial terror and anticolonial resistance, and has long been read as closely bound to the project of postcolonial nation-building. To this day, Algerian novelists in particular remain preoccupied by problems of testimony, violence, and justice as they grapple with questions inherited from those writers first charged with the task of forging national sovereignty by way of literature—yet so many of their fictions run counter, rather than conforming, to the demands of nationalism and the state.

In short, this dissertation defends the dissenting and transformative capacity of fiction in a context that has been dominated by the prerogatives of area studies and development discourse. It brings together literary texts in both French and Arabic with documents concerning torture and executions that circulated clandestinely during Algeria’s revolution (1954-1962) and civil war (1988-2001). I show how writers such as Yamina Mechakra, Assia Djebar, Tahar Djaout, and Waciny Laredj experiment with testimony’s ambivalent structure—between the veridical and the unverifiable—to imagine justice beyond the limits of the juridical. This project recognizes Algeria as an important center of aesthetic and theoretical innovation rather than as a post-colonized periphery relevant only through connection to the former colonial métropole. Highlighting the Franco-Algerian scene as an obscured prehistory of the neoimperial present, I argue that our thinking about modern state violence must place the unfinished project of decolonization at its center—and that this project is one of imaginative training, which is the domain of literature.
In memoriam

Yamina Mechakra
(1949-2013)

Assia Djebar
(1936-2015)

Fadwa Saidi
(1983-2016)
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PRIOR PUBLICATION AND PRESENTATIONS

These chapters were written and revised between 2012 and 2016. Early versions and excerpts of each chapter have appeared in other forms before being revised for inclusion in this dissertation manuscript.

An excerpt of Chapter 1, titled “Remnants of Muslims: Reading Agamben’s Silence,” won the Ralph Cohen Prize for First Publication and was published in New Literary History vol. 45, no. 4 (Autumn 2014), pp. 707-728. Brief sections from the Coda were published in different form in an essay co-authored with Anjuli Gunaratne entitled “Inheriting Assia Djebar,” in PMLA vol. 131, no. 1 (January 2016).

Each chapter has benefited from discussions following presentations in many different scholarly fora, as follows:

- Material from the Introduction: International Comparative Literature Association Conference (Sorbonne, July 2013) and Saharan Crossroads Conference (CRASC, Oran, Algeria, May 2014).
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- Material from the Coda: American Comparative Literature Association Annual Meeting (Harvard University, March 2016) and The Society for Novel Studies Biennial Meeting (Pittsburgh, May 2016).
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INTRODUCTION

‘LITTÉRATURE QUI EXPLOSE’

"Le temps nous défigure. Après deux secondes ou dix ans, vous n'êtes plus le même."
—Yamina Mechakra, in interview with Rachid Mokhtarî

This dissertation sets out a history of Algerian literary fiction as a critique of state violence in the late-twentieth century. Modern Maghrebi literature emerged in conditions of colonial terror and anticolonial resistance, and has long been cast as closely bound to projects of postcolonial state-formation and nation-building. Reading against the grain of both national and world literature paradigms, I track critical reflections on state violence and justice taken up by a network of Algerian writers since 1956, when Kateb Yacine published his novel *Nedjma* two years after the start of the anticolonial war that culminated with Algeria’s independence from French colonial rule in 1962.2

Resisting the ideological monolingualism and the periodizing that has oriented study of North African literature in general and Algerian literature in particular, I bring together fiction in both French and Arabic alongside activist documents that circulated during both Algeria’s national independence war (1954-1962) and its civil war (1988-2001). Working through problems of translation brought to light by these texts, I show how Algerian writers such as Yamina Mechakra, Assia Djebar, Tahar Djaout, and Waciny Laredj inherit and reimagine the past in fictions that challenge—rather than conforming to—the demands of nationalism and the state. Legal restitution has failed in our postcolonial time, yet literature holds open space to imagine collectivity beyond citizenship and justice beyond the juridical. In other words, this dissertation makes the case for reading fiction as an act of resistance and
hope in precarious times. My argument, and this hope, is inspired by many teachers—among them is Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, who concluded her powerful tribute to her friend, the late Assia Djebar, with this: “In Djebar’s Defense of Fiction (and mine too, ya Assia), we hold out for the imagination.” My project is also motivated by the filmmaker Abderrahmane Sissako’s statement, in a private conversation about his film Timbuktu, that art is “a form for imagining the justice that our world, such as it is, renders impossible.”

The French government long referred to the systematic repression and torture it carried out to preserve Algérie française as a ‘police action,’ or simply as ‘events,’ refusing to call it what it was: a colonizing war. Not until 1999 did the French National Assembly vote to formally acknowledge that something it named la guerre d’Algérie had ever taken place. This belated recognition from the former imperial nation-state came at a newly terrifying time: the 1990s are still referred to by most Algerians as ‘la décennie noire’—a ‘black decade’ during which the state closed national borders and prohibited media coverage of an invisible war waged against civilians by the police and the military as a reaction to Islamist groups that had taken up arms against the government after it cancelled elections in 1991. This terror and counter-terror claimed hundreds of thousands of lives during the 1990s, so many of which remain unaccounted for.

In this sense, the civil war—declared over by the Algerian government at the very moment a Global War on Terror was loosed on the world—remains unfinished. Amnesty legislation passed by the Bouteflika regime in the name of ‘national unity and reconciliation’ between 1999 and 2005 has foreclosed juridical process so that the perpetrators of these crimes cannot (and will likely never) be held legally responsible, much like the Evian Accords (1962) granted amnesty for crimes committed during the independence war. Today it is something of an open secret in Algeria that the highest-ranking state and military leaders are
complicit with (and directly responsible for) the terrors of the civil war. I am interested in how fiction lays claim to testimony and to justice under such conditions of state-sanctioned violence that render so many modes of speaking impossible, or at least inaudible—and not only in Algeria. Violent nationalism is not, of course, a peculiarly Algerian or African problem.

At its heart, *Absent Witness* defends the transformative and dissenting capacity of fiction in a context that has long been dominated by the prerogatives of area studies and development discourse. The chapters that follow present detailed readings that together bridge a gap in scholarship on political violence in Algeria and that also contribute to broader debates about the practice and possibilities of comparative literary study. I make specific interventions in twentieth-century Francophone and Arabophone literary studies and challenge Eurocentric assumptions that inhere in existing scholarship on literature, trauma, and testimony as I set this literary project in dialogue with more recent scholarship on modern state violence and French colonial terror. Studies of modern state violence and forms of trauma must reckon squarely with the history and legacies of European colonial terror.

Ethical and political reflection on Nazi violence and the great post-Holocaust trials of the last century (Nuremberg, Eichmann) has generated contemporary human rights discourse and largely defined understanding of testimony and its relation to theories of justice and history. Such reflection also produced the testimony, trauma, and memory studies scholarship that emerged in US literary departments during the 1990s—yet despite shared preoccupation with state violence and the paradoxes of testimony, there is a curious disciplinary décalage between Holocaust and postcolonial studies, a rift that I highlight in order to challenge. Furthermore, much scholarship on modern state violence has yet to substantively reckon with European colonial violence, while Anglophone-oriented
postcolonial studies has only begun to account for the particular and enduring legacies of French empire. Nowhere are such gaps more evident than in contemporary arguments to authorize state force or resuscitate the civilizing mission to fight perceived threats of Islamist ‘terror’, yet the lacunae is an equally salient feature of much scholarly and philosophical literature. Highlighting the Franco-Algerian scene as an obscured prehistory of the neoimperial present and of the Global War on Terror, I maintain that our thinking about modern state violence must place the unfinished project of decolonization at its center—and that this project is one of imaginative training, which is the domain of literature.

Since the early 1990s, scholars like Benjamin Stora (1991), Robert J.C. Young (1990), Kristin Ross (1995; 2002), Paige Athur (2010), Hannah Feldman (2014), and Debarati Sanyal (2015) have demonstrated that the Algerian Revolution produced an enduring, if disavowed, afterlife in French cultural memory and politics, and that this anticolonial struggle also lives on in what the English-speaking academy calls poststructuralist—and therefore postcolonial—theory. Many projects that make visible the recessed story of Algeria’s impact ‘on’ French and U.S. discourses are silent about the revolution’s effects south of the Mediterranean and other areas of the formerly colonized world; they also have not yet reflected critically on the violence that consumed Algeria during the 1990s. Scholars of colonial violence such as Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1972), Achille Mbembe (2003), Jim House (2006), Ranjana Khanna (2008), Marnia Lazreg (2008), and Sylvie Thénault (2011) help to reframe the Algerian Revolution as part of the long history of French colonial violence. While they pay close attention to the particularity of the Algerian scene, their important projects do not assess the important political work of literature on this scene. My study builds on these projects and addresses this gap by focusing on Algerian literary texts and
networks as I consider how writers take up fiction as a form of critical intervention in urgent debates about witnessing and justice under circumstances of institutionalized state violence.

In his *Experimental Nations: Or, the Invention of the Maghreb* (2003), Réda Bensmaïa summarizes the predicament inherited by Algerian writers after independence by citing the question they asked themselves: “How can we live in several languages and write in only one?” (Bensmaïa 15). Despite the region’s remarkable heteroglossia, most studies of modern Maghrebi literature exclusively concern works published in French (see Khatibi 1968, Woodhull 1993, Donadey 2001, Bensmaïa 2003, Stora 2005, and Khanna 2008 for a representative but by no means exhaustive sample). By contrast, literary histories of contemporary Arabic fiction frequently treat Mashreqi texts as paradigmatic and elide work produced by Maghrebi writers, or characterize Maghrebi texts as at once belated heirs of the *nabda* (Arabic cultural renaissance) and uniquely troubled by their proximity to French colonial institutions (see Roger Allen’s classic study *The Arabic Novel: An historical and critical introduction*, 1982, which both identifies this trend and reproduces it). The disciplinary habit of separating Francophone from Arabophone Maghrebi literary traditions is often informed by an assumption that Maghrebi writers primarily address audiences elsewhere—that is, that their texts belong to literary networks and markets centered in Paris or Cairo. Because I read French and Arabic Algerian fiction as intertextual and understand Algeria to be a vital nexus in the Mediterranean’s intellectual and cultural crossroads, I challenge this assumption.

The novels central to my study draw upon a number of shared literary resources highly particular to the Algerian context, including intertexts drawn from Kabylian, Saharan, and Subsaharan oral literatures, from *Alf layla wa layla* as well as the *Antigone*, from 14th century North African Arabic historiographies and travel narratives, and from 20th century prison narratives and torture testimonies. My claim is that this linguistic and generic
multiplicity presents not only a significant challenge to assumptions about testimony and witnessing that inhere in the existing scholarship, but also unsettles the disciplinary and geopolitical boundaries that distinguish between North Africa, Subsaharan Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. Closely reading Maghrebi texts at once confounds and enriches these distinctions. For example, diaspora studies concerning North Africa have largely been preoccupied by issues concerning North African immigration to Europe and within European cities. Shifting my focus to Algerian cultural production opens inquiry about the impact of emigration, and also brings into focus the rich discursive exchanges produced through centuries of human migration within the Maghreb and across the Sahara. My critical attention to the specificity and singularity of Algerian literary texts thus positions my project in a broader disciplinary debate concerning the appropriateness of categories like the nation-state, area studies, and ‘world literature’ as organizing schema for literary study.

2

The French and Algerian states both exercise authority to produce and to suppress what has (or will) become the matter of historiography, generating a material archive riddled with gaps and absences that pose a serious problem for justice—and a compelling invitation to the literary imagination. The historian Benjamin Stora has catalogued the corpus of writing generated in response to the Algerian Revolution (1954-1962). His *Dictionnaire des livres de la Guerre d’Algérie* (1996) and *Bibliographie de l’Algérie indépendante* (2011) list more than 3,000 historiographic and literary texts concerning that war, and the list only continues to grow. Inspired by Jacques Derrida, Stora points out that this expanding archive does not merely record but actively *produces* the nation’s history (see Stora 2005). As the liberation war has become a touchstone for political legitimacy in a postcolonial Algeria ruled by the once-
revolutionary vanguard, its historiography is enshrined as an important matter of state, and in fact functions to eclipse the possibility of writing any serious critical histories of the post-independence period. Derrida also reminds us that archivization is itself a law-founding violence that produces rather than merely records the past, and that this institutionalization produces an excluded remainder—hence the structure of the archive is spectral, both infinitely open and always haunted by that which it excludes. Derrida cites Zakhor: “It is possible that the antonym of ‘forgetting’ is not ‘remembering’ but justice” (Archive Fever, 50).

Fiction moves in this space, a supplement that haunts the verifiable with the unverifiable.

A novel is not an ideological tract but an act of philosophical reflection and political imagination; it offers not a program for action or a statement of position but an invitation to thinking. This point is too frequently forgotten by readers of African literature. In essays and interviews concerning the politics of literature during Algeria’s civil war, the Arabic-language novelist Waciny Laredj repeatedly highlights the literariness of fiction to counter the imperative that novels bear the burden of national memory: “Mais la littérature n’est pas une matière à souder les nations,” he insists in an interview in Rachid Mokhtari’s La graphie de l’horreur (2002), “C’est une matière imaginative, qui soude l’imaginaire et non pas les nations” (in Mokhtari 159). Laredj earlier elaborated a related point in his brief essay on Kateb Yacine’s role in the Algerian ‘Arabophone imaginary,’ a project he undertook after Kateb was abruptly removed from the first state-sponsored hommage to Algerian novelists, held in Algiers in 1987. Writing in 1998, Laredj defends Kateb as ‘un écrivain à la liberté de pensée indomptable.’ Here Laredj argues for practices of reading that recognize the particular ways in which texts such as Kateb’s stage a break with dominant discourse by their very ‘littérarité’. Of Kateb Yacine, Laredj writes:

…dans son œuvre il nous apparaît d’abord et avant tout comme l’artiste qui refuse non seulement de réproduire le discours dominant, mais qui le harcèle pour faire
advenir une parole capable de briser toutes les digues idéologiques. On mesure, de ce fait, à quel point une lecture idéologique qui, dans le meilleur des cas, n’accepte l’œuvre qu’après l’avoir aplatie en refusant l’épreuve de sa littérarité, serait déplacée en ce qui le concerne. Car une telle lecture ne peut qu’ignorer le mouvement véritable de l’écriture, avec toute sa richesse et sa complexité, pour en dévier la trajectoire ou carrément en évacuer l’essence même. (198-199)

That is, there are ways of posing political questions and disturbing dominant discourses that are specific to literary form and style, and my reading practice is to attend to this specificity. And—as Laredj’s defense of Kateb Yacine also demonstrates—writers, translators, and publishers in the Maghreb work and think between languages. It matters that their experiments and questions are posed in more than one language, and via literary texts that do not launch easily into transnational circuits and world-literary translation.

The texts I read together in this dissertation present a significant challenge to sanctioned narratives of the national past: they do not preserve, remember, or represent but rather experiment, interrupt, and disturb. In particular, the recent civil war has radically transformed the terms and forms in which writers figure the nation’s history and has lent new urgency to their critiques of political violence. For example, in October 1988 Assia Djebar interrupted work on the third novel of her Algerian Quartet (published in 1995 as Vaste est la prison) in order to write a different novel, one that she had not planned to write.

By her own account, she wrote this other novel in response to the murders carried out in the name of Islam and by the Algerian police on the streets of Algiers and in the surrounding mountains that month, a date now widely cited to mark the beginning of the civil war.12

Of this unexpected novel, published in 1991 as Loin de Médine, Djebar has remarked: ‘C’est une coupure—c’est une irruption, je dirais presqu’une cassure dans mon œuvre—qui a été écrite d’un coup, pour participer à un débat précis: c’est une œuvre de circonstance’ (interview in Zimra, 1996, 823). Djebar interrupted her own work to contest fundamentalist readings of Islamic tradition specific Algeria in the late 1980s, and it follows that the form of
her intervention reflects the specificity of these circumstances. Gayatri Spivak reads *Loin de Médine* as Djebar’s prayer to be haunted by her female ancestors and theorizes this mode of haunting as ‘an attempt to establish the ethical relationship with history as such’ (see “Ghostwriting,” 1995). Clarisse Zimra echoes and extends Spivak’s point by identifying the novel’s poetics of *ijtibād* as the rhetorical strategy by which Djebar inscribes *Loin de Médine* into the intercessive relay of the *isnād*, staking her claim to narrative authority by invoking the hermeneutic norms of an exegetical tradition concerned with distinguishing truth from untruth by establishing a chain of reliable witnesses traceable to the time of the prophet (see Zimra 1996 and 1999). This novel’s intertextual reworking of the narrative codes of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and hadith scholarship thereby positions its narrator/writer as an intercessor who participates in a discursive tradition revised to include previously excluded female eye-witnesses—a move that escapes or eludes the crushing frame of the present.

*Loin de Médine’s* intertextual form is a subversive act of inheriting that revives and transfigures a notion of political commitment (‘œuvre de circonstance’). This practice of intertextual inheriting is one way to understand how literary texts intervene in political discourse, or, in Laredj’s terms, just how literary texts might ‘faire advenir une parole capable de briser toutes les digues idéologiques.’ In her doctoral thesis (1985), Algerian literary scholar Christian Chaulet Achour highlights the ‘intertextualité prismaétique’ of African literature more broadly and Algerian literary texts in particular to make a similar claim. Any text, as she writes, is like a “carrefour et réceptacle de langues et de cultures diversifiées que l’écriture tente d’assimiler” (461). ‘Intertextuality,’ Chaulet-Achour reminds us, is thus a name for how multiple threads cross in any literary text, and an illuminating metaphor for how a text is always connected to a multitude of other(s) texts, inhabited by and inscribed with them, polysemic, dialogic, multicode, *open* at the ‘edges.’
Chaulet-Achour draws two clarifying distinctions here. She notes, first, that intertextuality operates in at least two ways—in both citational and generic modes (that is a text both repeats elements of other texts, for example by citing titles, lines, lyrics, motifs, epigraphs, images, transcribing verbal sounds and proper names; it also replicates genre conventions/codes that make it recognizable as, say, a novel, a récit, a qissa). She then draws a critical distinction between a concept of intertextuality as passive ‘acculturation’ and a concept of intertextuality as dynamic ‘inheritance.’ To ‘inherit’ is an active critical process, she argues—not unlike translation in that it always transforms what it transmits. The point of drawing this distinction is to recognize intertextuality not as a form for preserving and transmitting cultural and linguistic heritage in literary form as a kind of museumization or expression of national or ethnic identity, but rather as the rhetorical and aesthetic practice by which writers invent by reworking the diverse aesthetic resources available to them.

In her essay ‘The Extroverted African Novel’ (in *The Novel* Volume 1, ed. Moretti, 2007), Eileen Julien reinforces this important point, a point that informs my own practice of reading novels counter to the imperatives of nationalist and world literary projects. Julien, advancing a compelling case against Jameson and Moretti’s formulations of national allegory and world literature, argues that ‘intertextuality’ is not a natural or inevitable effect but rather a rhetorical strategy “through which the writer attempts to resolve aesthetic and social questions” (679). “African novels are well read,” in Julien’s opinion, “if they are perceived as ‘fulfillment’ rather than as an ‘effect.’” She adds: “Narrative is a privileged artistic and literary form because the very ideology of narrative is to endow events with meaning, in other words, to rewrite history” (667-8). Novels, then, must be thought of as doing something other than reflecting, representing, and recording history—by their very form they intervene
critically in its production, making it possible to imagine not just other histories but also other futures.

3

Several of the primary texts central to this dissertation have never been translated to English, and some have never been published outside Algeria. This does not, of course, mean that such texts are actually untranslatable—Yamina Mechakra’s *La grotte éclatée*, for example, could surely be translated to English, although it has not yet been. Kateb Yacine wrote a preface to Mechakra’s 1979 novel that is by far more frequently read and cited than Mechakra’s novel itself, in particular his suggestive claim about Mechakra that “À l’heure actuelle, dans notre pays, une femme qui écrit vaut son pesant de poudre” (Right now, in our country, a woman who writes is worth her weight in gunpowder). That such a stunning novel remains so obscure and has not been picked up for publication in France nor for translation to English raises important political and methodological questions about which texts are made visible through world-literary translation and canonizing institutions, which are not, and why. Reading a novel such as *La grotte éclatée*—so explosive, so strange—also gives good reason to question whether the cosmopolitanism of world literature is the only or best way to transcend or disrupt the narrow limits of nationalism.

Eileen Julien opens her essay “The Extroverted African Novel” (2007) with a point that bears repeating here: to raise the question of translating literary texts ‘out of Africa’ is to “invite reflection on a range of issues at once literary, economic, social, and political,” given “contexts of radically asymmetrical power and manifestly coercive processes of exchange and globalization” (667). To ask why don’t we read or study Mechakra’s work? is to draw attention to the asymmetrical processes of exchange and the checkpoints that control literary
translation into English. I read against the grain of that “World” (systems) model of literary study that—as Emily Apter points out in Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability (2013)—“forgets’ the checkpoint” in its celebratory promotion of border-crossing and its desire for universal commensurability that defies the strictures of nationalism” (104). Critically inspired by Apter’s move to “activate untranslatability as a theoretical fulcrum” (31), I take Mechakra’s puzzling failure to translate as an invitation to read her texts—alongside others more canonical and accessible—without either pinning them to a nation-state epistemology or conscripting them for World Literature and its related taxonomies. Attending to the resistance of untranslatability is one way into this double-bind, that is, into the thicket of language. ‘Untranslatability’ doesn’t mean that something is absolutely untranslatable but rather names the particular resistance that makes translation possible and necessary.

Nasrin Qader shares Eileen Julien’s objection to the way that African literary studies have long been framed by scholars in the US academy—namely via the discourse and motifs of postcoloniality (hybridity, exile, disenchantment with the failed postcolonial state, ‘writing back’ to the former imperial center), reduced to ‘national allegory’ (à la Jameson), submitted to distant reading (à la Moretti), and above all treated as constative documents that testify to socio-political realities rather than as complex imaginative works that merit the privilege of close reading attentive to aesthetic form and style (à la the existing scholarship on Mechakra as one case in point; see note 13). In the introduction to her Narratives of Catastrophe, Qader notes that the relationship of African literary studies to anthropology and ethnography remains “difficult to debunk” (1), at the expense of the attentiveness routinely granted to European canonical texts. Though Qader does not cite her, Gayatri Spivak’s intervention is crucial here: “without a sense of the rhetoricity of language,” Spivak has insisted, “a species
of neocolonialist construction of the non-Western scene is afoot” (‘Politics of Translation,’ in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, 371). Qader further observes that the African literary texts that “lend themselves” to such thematic and testimonial constructions are the very texts that tend to “circulate more easily, while others remain unread, untranslated, uncommented upon, or even unheard of and quickly go out of print precisely because of their resistance to such overarching assumptions of representation and documentation” (2, my emphasis).

Julien terms this capacity ‘extroversion.’ Answering a question raised by Simon Gikandi about the monumental status ascribed to Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Julien argues that those African literary texts that have traveled most readily and widely—indeed the high canon now called ‘African literature,’ usually Anglophone or Francophone—do so precisely because they are ‘turned outward’ by formal design. The ‘extroverted’ text, writes Julien, “physically crosses borders and thematizes border crossings”; it is “characterized above all by its intertextuality with hegemonic or global discourses and its appeal across borders” (681). That is, the African novels picked up for circulation by transnational markets, made visible to and by canonizing institutions, and rendered available for and in English translation (if not produced in English) are also those marked by “explicit engagement—or a capacity to be read as engaging—broad critical debates” (681-2), eg, those debates, discourses, and questions tacitly assumed to be originally European or ultimately universal. Julien lists “surrealism, primitivism, magical realism, cultural studies, postcolonial theory, …Marxism, feminism, democratization and governance, politics of the state, and globalization” [685]; Qader adds discourses of catastrophe, violence, emergency, and disaster.

Consider how *Heart of Darkness* has been rewritten by generations of African writers as different as Achebe (*Things Fall Apart*, 1959), Tayib Salih (*Season of a Migration to the North,*

Julien’s point stands. Her claim, in sum, is that African literary texts become ‘worldly’ to the degree that they appeal to transnational readers *by intertextual design*, and to the degree that they address—be it in a mode of filiation or contestation—a testimonial imperative that continues to be posed even as imperial capitals shift: *Who are you? Translate yourself to me.*

In his essay ‘The Postcolonial Comparative’ (2013), Robert Young suggests that such an imperative to translate is an aftereffect of the long history of European colonial violence. Postcolonial literature is “haunted” and “tormented” by comparatism, Young writes, “since it is written from the position of always already having been put in comparison with other literatures” (688). Young’s reading of Abdelfattah Kilito’s *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language* underscores the point that the persistence of this imperative is not just a fault of European perception, but that writers and readers of Arabic/postcolonial literature too have internalized practices of Euro-oriented self-translation: “Arabic literature from the nineteenth-century onwards,” writes Young, “is always read in comparison with European literature, and not by choice” (686). Young cites Kilito: “the reader of an Arabic text soon connects it, directly or indirectly, to a European text. He is necessarily a comparatist, or we could say a translator” (in Young 687). While Young’s argument certainly rings quite true, it may also be true that this imposed auto-translation is not only an inevitable effect of colonial violence but also an aesthetic strategy that facilitates circulation, and that the examples that Young may have in mind are available as examples precisely *because* they manifest this extroverted or self-comparative capacity. It may be true, too, that not all literary texts one
might classify ‘postcolonial’ appear haunted by an imperative to translate in quite this way, yet that their very resistance to such imperatives also places them off the radar of most readers.

One way back to the initial question (why not Mechakra) is to reframe it as a comparison: why does work by a writer such Assia Djebar (or Kamel Daoud) appear so regularly (one might say excessively) in studies of Maghrebi and Algerian literature, but not work by writers such as Yamina Mechakra or Abdelhamid Benehedouga or Waciny Laredj?

Djebar’s challenging texts present no slight resistance to reductive reading habits, yet it also has become increasingly difficult to ignore the eclipsing effect of her canonical status or the domesticating impulses manifest in translations and paratext that recontextualize her work as ‘world literary.’ Consider Djebar’s collection of short fiction *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* (1980). According to Clarisse Zimra’s afterword to its English translation, *this is the book that put Djebar “back on the international map.”* Zimra organized the 1992 English translation by Marjolijn de Jager (CARAF Books), which won the ALTA prize as one of ten best English translations that year. The paratext of *Women of Algiers in their apartment* recodes the Algerian-French novelist as exemplary postcolonial/Muslim feminist/World Literary genius. Zimra’s afterword sets Djebar into an English literary constellation with Conrad and Shakespeare (161), and a back-cover blurb from Spivak justly praises Djebar’s postface as “a major theoretical intervention”—endorsements that surely pique the interest of elite critical readers. Zimra further characterizes Djebar as “the most gifted woman artist to come out of the Moslem [sic] world in our century,” a “woman of contrasts” who is “equally at ease in the West as in her native Islam” (161), intimating that Djebar merits attention because she is a exceptionally fluent border-crosser positioned to translate an opaque ‘Moslem world’ and ‘Islamic’ native tongue (it is unclear what this
means) into universal and accessible terms: “Far from being limited to the ‘plight of the Algerian woman,’” writes Zimra, “this collection of short stories speaks to all of us” (161).

Women of Algiers is indeed the text that ushered Djebar’s work into the English-speaking academy and facilitated her world-literary canonization. Of sixteen literary texts, eight have been published in English translation since Women of Algiers. Djebar’s ambivalent relationship with the French language is a point of thematic and formal tension in her work; the border-transgressing, translational poetics that make these texts so compelling and challenging in French at once invite and challenge their translation to English. Many of these—especially Femmes d’Alger and L’amour la fantasia—have become important teaching texts in US graduate and undergraduate courses. Djebar’s oeuvre has inspired a growing archive of secondary critical literature. She won the 1996 Neustadt Prize for World Literature, was elected to the Académie française in 2006, and was annually nominated for a Nobel.

The stories comprising Femmes d’Alger were composed between 1959 and 1979 and published in 1980 by the militant Paris feminist press éditions des femmes. In comparison, Mechakra wrote what would become La grotte éclatée over the 1960s, signed her text with the date 1973, and published it with the state-run Société nationale d’édition et de diffusion (SNED) in Algiers in 1979. That is, these two works of fiction were written over the same years and published at almost precisely the same moment, in different capitals, by Algerian writers described by their closest readers as exceptionally gifted. That both writers are women who treat similar themes—the experiences of Algerian women suffering the aftereffects of the national independence war—is not surprising, because figuring the revolution was by that time something of a requirement for Algerian women novelists to
publish at all. Given all that these two texts share in common, why have they traveled so differently?

Its intertexts suture Femmes d’Alger to a discursive history of European representations of Algiers (and in particular of algéroises) as the novel critically rewrites the violent translational exchange that has long connected this city to the French métropole. In her recent From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing art and representation in France (2014), art historian Hannah Feldman describes how the 19th-century architectural redesign of the Algiers port under Napoleon III—constructing Boulevard de l’Impératrice and airy arcades in place of a cramped Casbah market—reoriented the labyrinthine fortress of Algiers to the sea and opened the city physically and figuratively to Paris beyond in order to transform it from a ‘ville de guerre’ into a ‘ville du libre-échange.’ Djebar’s title is itself a multivalent citation that evokes the not-so-‘free’ exchanges of that early colonial moment: Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement is also the title of a series of paintings, one of which is the book’s cover image, painted by French orientalist Eugène Délacroix between 1830 and 1849 after his visit to a private home in the Algiers Casbah. In her afterward to the text, Djebar points out that Picasso borrowed Délacroix’s title to name his own series of paintings, completed after his own three-month visit to Algiers at the start of the insurrection in 1954-5 when he was inspired by the sight of women militants there.

Set in intimate interiors—homes, hammams—of this Algiers (and Tunis), Femmes d’Alger draws upon a rich archive of such Mediterranean-traversing intertexts. It plays on the generic tropes of popular colonial postcards that bore images of Alger-la-blanc and its imprisoned women to recipients in the metropole at the turn of the 20th century. The title story’s opening paragraphs is a haunted prose portrait of a woman undergoing torture by electrification (la gégène), a scene recognizable not only because its cinematic quality calls to
mind Pontecorvo’s classic 1964 film, but also because it replicates specific details reported by
the numerous torture testimonies and photographic evidence smuggled into publication by
Maspero and Minuit in Paris as the French counterrevolutionary war intensified from 1957-
1962. Just after his Femmes d’Alger series, Picasso also drew a portrait for the cover of a
collection of testimonies compiled in 1961 by Simone de Beauvoir and Gisele Halimi on
behalf of FLN militant Djamila Boupacha, a political prisoner submitted by French soldiers
both to rape and to ‘la légène.’ To depict the lives of women in post-independence Algiers
by citing and reworking these intertexts is to tap into an archive of tropes, images, and
anxieties legible and relevant to readers in France and surely compelling to éditions des femmes.
The first run of Femmes d’Alger sold out in months.

My claim is that ‘Algiers/Alger’ is a modern global intertext, and that to cite this
discursive network connecting Algiers to Paris is a strategy of extroversion that addresses
French readers and that also beckons for translation to English. Since the early 1990s,
scholars have considered the myriad ways in which the French experience of Algerian
decolonization produced a constitutive, if disavowed, afterlife in French cultural memory
and politics, and have also shown that this anticolonial rupture also inspired writers whose
work the English-speaking academy inherits in translation as poststructuralist—and hence
postcolonial—theory. Thanks to this translational inheritance, US academics readily
imagine Derrida’s Algiers, or Fanon’s. And as ‘Algiers’ has been more recently appropriated
as prehistory/primer to the US-led war on terror, its representation has also been
instrumentalized for pedagogies that serve US geopolitical interest: in the years after 9/11,
for example, George W. Bush read Alistair Horne’s A Savage War of Peace and Camus’s
L’Étranger for insight into Iraq, and the Pentagon screened Pontecorvo’s film for its
employees with this suggestive tagline on the poster advertising the screening: “How to win
a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. Children shoot soldiers at point-blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar?

The twenty-first century has certainly generated new contexts for reading fiction by a monumentalized Algerian writer such as Assia Djebar, and newly urgent imperatives for her translation and circulation in English. To the point: Djebar’s texts are marked by formal and thematic extroversion that render them relevant and critically engaging to readers in Paris, New York, and Princeton, which helps to account at least in part for why her texts have translated and traveled so far. Perhaps because they pose resistance to the kinds of translation that Djebar has invited (or been submitted to), texts by other Algerian writers—and the careers of these writers—have traced quite different itineraries. My project links these disparate itineraries to explore networks and publics that bypass or interrupt the (presumed) dominant lines of exchange between former colony and former imperial metropole. Moreover, the knots of intertextual density and the resistant untranslatability that characterize many of these novels strike me as designed not just appeal to existing desires or to address readers elsewhere, but to elicit other desires, and to address Algerian readers. Above all the texts I read here do not represent, remember, or memorialize history so much as explode it to find new forms for speaking that point toward impossible yet necessary justice.

This dissertation reflects a practice of literary ‘comparison’ that is not a method for juxtaposing objects of study across national or linguistic borders, but rather a mode of reading that recognizes the linguistic and aesthetic complexity of literary texts as irreducibly
comparative and politically consequential. *Absent Witness* is thus organized not as a chronology or comprehensive history so much as it is an exploratory lexicon that rigorously questions the historical and ideological divide between French and Arabic in and beyond modern Algeria. Each chapter hinges on a key term, or related terms—words whose untranslatability or critical resignification in different contexts unsettles sedimented definitions in ways that prompt new insight concerning state violence, testimony, and justice.

Chapter 1, ‘Remnants of Muslims: Fanon, Agamben, and the Ghosts of Algérie Française,’ juxtaposes Frantz Fanon’s analysis of a spectral condition called ‘arabe’ with Giorgio Agamben’s more recent theoretical appropriation of the enigmatic term ‘Muselmann’ in order to clarify the stakes of my reading fiction by Algerian writers as testimonial. In his *Homo Sacer* project, Agamben picks up this word from Primo Levi to recast it as *the* key to understanding politics and ethics after World War II (Levi remembers it from the deranged jargon of Auschwitz, an epithet for the camp’s most dehumanized prisoners), yet nowhere does Agamben consider the word’s other life in the juridical codes on which French empire was built. Drawing insight from Fanon’s writings on the category of legal exception and politically calculated invisibility called ‘français-musulman’ that was first tested by the French Republic in Algeria, I highlight the occluded colonial context of Agamben’s master category to bridge a disciplinary rift between Holocaust and postcolonial studies and to reframe the act of testifying from the standpoint of the formerly colonized, which casts a different light on testimony’s relationship to the law.

Chapter 2, ‘Testimony Outside the Law: A Poetics of Justice for Djamila Boupacha’ reads the torture case of anticolonial militant Djamila Boupacha (1962) to articulate the formal limits of ‘testimony/témoignage’ as it was instrumentalized by activists for political resistance during the Algerian independence war. Drawing on work by Jacques Derrida and
close readings of a number of activist texts both verbal and visual—La gangrène (1959), Nuremberg Pour l’Algérie! (1961), Femmes Algériennes 1960—I show that testimony is a speech act haunted by religious and juridical protocols and structured by a paradox (a witness claims to speak an unverifiable truth), and hence that these ostensibly veridical texts have an inevitable affinity with fiction. Anticolonial activists struggled yet failed to raise Algerian testimony to an international stage in their effort to test the new juridical definition of genocide and to force the French state into compliance with its own legal codes. Boupacha’s unresolved case forces into view her own legally orchestrated absence before the law. In this situation of juridical impasse, ‘testimony’ becomes the name for the juncture where justice must part ways with the state.

Chapter 3, ‘Untranslatable Justice: Yamina Mechakra’s Fiction for the Future’ follows this insight with a study of La grotte éclatée (1979), a novel by one of Algeria’s most brilliant yet least known writers, Yamina Mechakra. Mechakra stages moudjahida testimony only to subvert this emphatically state-sanctioned genre in a fiction whose tragic register and fragmented form significantly mute the untranslatable term ‘shahid’—a protective silencing that shields the Arabic word from the state’s reductive instrumentalization of it (‘martyr/witness/war hero’) in ways that at once presage and contest the ‘national tragedy’ yet to come. An extraordinary experiment in finding words for war that cannot be made useful to the state, La grotte éclatée invents forms of testimony and witnessing that disrupt juridical notions of intelligibility and unravel the state’s teleological epic of justified sacrifice. Juxtaposing Mechakra’s subtle 1999 revisions to her 1979 novel with Assia Djebar’s reflections on the dangerous ideologeme surrounding the word ‘shahid’ during Algeria’s ‘Black Decade’ of the 1990s, I argue that Mechakra’s formal and aesthetic preoccupation with ‘witnessing’ (shahada) assumes newly dissident valences for the regime that governing
Algeria until the present moment—a regime whose power depended on disavowing its complicity in the terrors of that unresolved war.

Chapter 4, ‘Lines of Flight: A Thousand Nights for a Dark Decade’ explores the politics and poetics of translation between Arabic and French in postcolonial Algeria, focusing on a moment at the early cusp of a war still widely referred to as ‘la décennie noire’ or ‘snin al-irhab’ (years of terror). I read Waciny Laredj’s controversial novel Sayyidatu l-maqâm (1993), later translated into French by Marcel Bois as Les ailes de la reine (2009), as a bold act of intertextual translation that resignifies ‘terror’ to name not only the violence committed by religious extremists but also—especially—that of the state military and police forces. Composed at the threshold of war and published just after Tahar Djaout became the first of many writers assassinated (it remains unclear whether he was killed by the Groupe Islamique Armée or by the state), Laredj’s Arabic text answers boldly to his literary predecessor Tahar Ouettar, an outspoken proponent of Arabic-only language policy who explicitly cast his own novel El-Zilzal (The Earthquake, 1974) as an act of literary revenge on the former colonial tongue and who also publicly disparaged the murdered Djaout. Sayyidatu l-maqâm/Les ailes de la reine flies in the face of Ouettar’s defense of monolingual violence by performing a bold act of intertextual translation—namely by channeling the narrative terror of the 1001 Nights—in a capacious Arabic that revels in the heteroglossic, translational ethos of living language in Algeria as an alternate map for its future.

1 Rachid Mokhtari, Yamina Mechakra, entretiens et lectures (Algiers: Editions Chihab, 2015).

2 In his 1968 doctoral thesis, Abdelkébir Khatibi writes, in a reflection on the impact of Nedjma across the Maghreb (1956), that “la révolution Algérienne a été une greffe dans notre destin” (Le roman maghrébin, 114). In her 1995 essay ‘Tout doit-il disparaître?’ included in Ces voix qui m’assiègent (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), Assia Djebar identifies the publication of Nedjma as marking a literary explosion into modernity: “En littérature, il faudrait prendre la
date de 1956, celle de la parution du roman Nedjma de Kateb Yacine, plutôt naissance d’une littérature qui explode, d’un coup, dans la modernité” (Ces voix: 244). A grafting, a literary explosion: this as good a way to periodize as any, perhaps better than citing the date of national independence as temporal starting point for my study (1962).

This tribute, delivered at the tribute held at Princeton on March 6 2015, was also published online: http://www.frontierweekly.com/articles/vol-48/48-14-17/48-14-17-Assia%20Djebar.html

See Benjamin Stora’s *La guerre invisible: Algérie années 90* (Paris: La bibliothèque du citoyen, 2001) for a concise and clear discussion of this period, and of the reasons for the systematic production of blindness and opacity that characterized this war.

According to these arguments, the Algerian Revolution—in particular, the shock and shame experienced by French citizens at revelations of French counterrevolutionary practices both in Algeria (torture, especially the sensationalized cases of tortured women militants of the FLN like Djamila Bouhired and Djamila Boupacha in 1961 and 1962, respectively) and on the streets of the metropole itself (for example, the massacre of Algerian demonstrators by French police that took place in Paris on 17 October 1961)—served as the occasion for a decisive fracture within the French humanist tradition, a break that we (intellectuals working in U.S. academy) have inherited. Benjamin Stora describes the Algerian revolution as a trauma that shook the foundations of the fourth republic, led to its collapse, and still haunts French cultural memory, immigration policies, and racism. In his *White Mythologies* (1990), Robert Young highlights the temporal coincidence of deconstruction with decolonization; points out that Sartre, Althusser, Derrida, Lyotard, and Cixous were all either born in Algeria or personally involved in the war; and argues that the Algerian War, not May 1968, was the rupture or fracture moment that produced “so-called poststructuralism” (Young 1990). In *May 68 and its Afterlives* (2002), Kristin Ross complicates Young’s point with her claim that the French general strike and events of May 1968 were in fact *prefigured* by the demonstrations against the Algerian war a decade prior. Paige Arthur’s *Unfinished Projects: Decolonization and the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (2010), a study of the relationship between Sartre’s involvement in Third World anticolonial movements and his philosophical writings, is a recent and important contribution to this scholarship. If May 1968 was a moment that transformed the thinking of Sartre, Althusser, Badiou, Rancière, Blanchot, Maspero, Daniel Bensaïd, Martine Storti, Guy Hocquenghem, and so many others, then Algeria—and colonial force displaced onto the streets of Paris—defined and prefigured that fracture. And if Algeria served to effect a political awakening for the French students and activists who became the very intellectuals whose writing and thinking about violence, racism, and subjection has produced the debates that the Anglo-American academy has inherited in translation, then in some real sense Algeria remains with ‘us’, too, at least in theory.

‘Mashreq’ refers to the Eastern part of the Arabic-speaking world, that is: Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine. The term ‘Maghreb’ is both the Arabic name for Morocco and a broader regional description of the Western part of the Arabic-speaking world, that is: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania, Western Sahara.
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7 Malika Rahal, examining the difficulties faced by contemporary historians of Algeria in her essay “Fused Together and Torn Apart: Stories and Violence in Contemporary Algeria” (*History and Memory*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Spring/Summer 2012), asks: “Is a history of contemporary Algeria possible, in particular with regard to periods of time whose actors are still alive? The overwhelming number of publications concerning the War for Independence—and more generally the colonial period—in contrast with the scarcity of historical works dealing with the country after it became independent casts doubt on the very possibility. There are abundant reasons explaining the difficulty of writing national history about and in Algeria: the lack of access to—and indeed the very dearth of—archives; the material and intellectual conditions within Algerian universities during Arabization; and, of course, the repression wielded by a one-party regime that used national narrative as a means to anchor its legitimacy. These factors have appeared sufficiently self-explanatory as to make any further enquiry into the possibility of writing a history of the post-independence period seem unnecessary.”

8 Malika Rahal studies this process of official history writing. She also elaborates a new chronological framework of continual war between 1945 and 2002 in Algeria, which inspires the long temporal arc of my own project. Rahal details how the teleological national epic produced and endorsed by the FLN leadership under Boumédienne was widely disseminated during the 1970s, when the state’s near-total monopoly on academic, educational, and popular publishing and over the national archives ensured that textbooks, scholarship, and pedagogies alike “reflected the dominant narrative: certain themes, figures, or organizations were simply written out” and thereby “directly influenced the material available to historians and determined the questions they could—or could not—ask” (125).

9 Inspired by Jacques Rancière’s claim that the ‘politics of literature’ has little to do with the political commitments and statements of writers and much to do with how literary texts intervene in and transform shared perception (‘partage du sensible’) by adding to what it is possible to see and to know, I read literary fiction not as a mode of representation (or counter-representation) but as a form of ethical reflection, epistemological critique, aesthetic experiment.


12 Here is Djebar’s more extended account of the circumstances that motivated her to write *Loin de Médine*: “Car je suis hantée, pour ma part—et ce, même avant cet orage—par un long et durable état de morbidité dans lequel s’est retrouvée la culture algérienne au présent…J’ai paru m’attarder sur les ruines d’un savoir déliquescent, dont l’échec pathétique aurait dû nous annoncer beaucoup plus tôt les prodromes d’une explosion: celle d’octobre 88. Six cent cadavres de jeunes gens au soleil: cette saignée à blanc de l’avenir n’eut pas droit à la moindre déploration liturgique dans une des trois langues ou dans la symphonie des trois conjuguées: où gisait donc la poésie, et ses cimes, et ses abîmes?” (Djebar, *Le blanc de l’Algérie*)

13 A definition from Hans-Wehr’s Arabic-English dictionary: “effort, exertion, endeavor, pains, trouble; application, industry, diligence; *(Isl. Law)* independent judgment in a legal or theological question, based on the interpretation and application of the *usūl*, as opposed to *taqlīd*; individual judgment.”

14 The Arabic critical term for the chain of narrative transmission that accompanies each hadith to establish its authenticity (*sahīh*=true). A hadith text contains two elements: the *matn*, or narrative of the hadith, and the *isnad*, which documents the transmission of the reported narrative and thereby gives the reader evidence by which to determine the historical legitimacy of the hadith. Again, here is the Hans-Wehr entry for *sanād*: “support, prop, stay, rest, backing; ascription (of an Islamic tradition), the (uninterrupted) chain of authorities on which a tradition is based.”

Valerie Orlando reads Mechakra thematically rather than formally to arrive at a reading of the novel as a celebration of the nation-state as utopia, a reading that directly contradicts my own: “The solidifying theme of Mechakra’s work is the idea that women are the source of a nation and the foundation of the independent nation-state. … Mechakra, writing seventeen years after the war’s end, views women as providing the new nation-state with future generations of Algerian youth who will uphold the idea of nation and family as synonymous necessities for the benefit of the collective good. In a sense, for Mechakra, the nation cannot exist without the power of the family: the two are inextricably linked. It is the nation-state, born out of war and revolution, which will in turn give birth to an egalitarian utopia enjoyed by men and women.” (149-150)

16 “Not only did Europe colonize the world, it imposed its cultural tastes, aesthetic preferences, and criteria for judgment on the colonized. For centuries Europe has operated as the third, abstract mediating term in the three-part model of Western comparatism that imperial culture inflicted on the world. The ‘universal’ terms of the comparative, or of Weltliteratur continue today as a way of enforcing the ideology and practices of globalization in the literary world” (Young 687).

17 “Non-western literature is of interest only to the extent that it resembles Western literature…Western accounts of contemporary world literature tend to celebrate novels that present stereotypical or assumed microcosmic portraits of non-Western societies—The Jacoubian Building, The Kite Runner, Reading Lolita in Teheran—catering to Western preconceptions about the Middle East or the ‘Muslim World’” (Young 687).

18 Zimra notes that Djebar chose éditions des femmes over the Algerian state publisher SNED after trouble stemming from production of her state-funded 1978 film La nouba des femmes de Mont Chenoua; this is intriguing and suggestive—especially given that Mechakra first published with SNED at the same time that Djebar rejected them. Also, Djebar was censured as insufficiently political by Algerian audiences after Mostefa Lacheraf’s scathing assessment of her work; Farida Lakhdar Barka suggested to me that Djebar’s decision to publish with éditions des femmes was a way to leap over the Algerian national audience to find another public that would assess her work by different standards.

19 Here see Benjamin Stora’s excellent essay “Women’s Writing Between Two Algerian Wars,” Research in African Literatures 30.3 (1999) 78-94. He writes: “Of the overall figure of works dealing with the "first" Algerian war, barely 10 percent are by women (approximately 240 out of 2,200). The description of the world of war thus remains the privilege of the men who made it. The same is true for today’s conflict.” Also: “The novel is at the heart of the women's writing about the Algerian wars. During the first phase, 1954-62, the novel is the dominant literary form for the women pieds-noirs, Algerians, Metropolitans. Out of 179 works, 101 are novels, and more than half of these (52) are the work of pieds-noirs. More than half of the novels by Algerian women come from the pen of Assia Djebar alone.”

20 The full passage from Feldman, From a Nation Torn: “The boulevard’s design aimed to symbolically transform Algiers from the ‘ville de guerre’ or military camp it had been, to a city of free exchange, a city of pleasantness, a ‘ville du libre-échange’ or ‘ville de plaisance.’” By
proclaiming the city’s modernity and universalism, Chassriau’s projects more fully secured the destruction of the remaining integrity of Algiers’s Arabo-Ottoman appearance and, as Nabila Oulebsir has described it, the city became ‘more French than Moorish’” (57).


22 Michael T. Kaufman for the New York Times, 7 September 2003, “What Does the Pentagon See in the ‘Battle of Algiers’?”. The Pentagon poster concludes: “The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film.” Kaufman writes: “The idea came from the Directorate for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, which a Defense Department official described as a civilian-led group with ‘responsibility for thinking aggressively and creatively’ on issues of guerrilla war. The official said, ’Showing the film offers historical insight into the conduct of French operations in Algeria, and was intended to prompt informative discussion of the challenges faced by the French.’ He added that the discussion was lively and that more showings would probably be held.”
CHAPTER ONE

REMNANTS OF MUSLIMS:
Fanon, Agamben, and the Ghosts of Algérie française

“A crush. A surge. Muslims. Skeletons. Skeletons. You do not see them. Just as you do not see the paper but the words written on it.”

—Ka-Tzetnik, Moni: A novel of Auschwitz
(Hebrew 1961; English 1962)\(^1\)

Figure 1.1 Aldo Carpi, 'Inmates', 1945

1 | Banal Arithmetic

Dictating from his hospital bed in Bethesda in late 1961 as the war for Algerian independance waged to its end without him, Frantz Fanon named a blindspot in the logic of French empire. In a passage of ‘De la violence’—a chapter of Les damnés de la terre that has been subject to a long history of interpretation and translation that has rendered it more prescriptive than phenomenological—Fanon notes that “ce raisonnement qui prévoit très arithmétiquement la disparition du peuple colonisé ne bouleverse pas le colonisé d'indignation morale” ‘this reasoning that so arithmetically forsees the disappearance of colonized people does not disturb the colonized with moral indignation’ (82).\(^2\) His diction accents the arithmetic character of this reasoning. The temporal sense of the verb ‘prévoir’
suggests predictive foresight, while ‘disparition’ seems to refer at once to a process of epistemological erasure and to the act of killing of colonized people.

This exercise of state force, Fanon suggests, is obvious and unsurprising to those whom it threatens, but so imperceptible to so-called ‘civilized consciences’ that its exposure comes as a shock to them. He illustrates with this scene of war:

[Les colonisés] constatent en effet sur le terrain que tous les discours sur l’égalité de la personne humaine entassés les uns sur les autres ne masquent pas cette banalité qui veut que les sept Français tués ou blessés au col de Sakamody soulevent l’indignation des consciences civilisées tandis que «comptent pour du beurre» la mise à sac des douars Guergour, de la dechra Djerah, le massacre des populations qui avaient précisément motivé l’embuscade. (86)

In his description of an arithmetic that does not add up, Fanon exposes an incommensurability whereby one Algerian life does not equal one French life. By such logic, he notes, lives lost in the massacred villages of Guergour and Djerah count as ‘butter’ while French lives lost in an ambush at Sakamody pass count as precisely seven; the latter appear as protectible and grievable subjects of égalité while the former disappear into a decimated landscape that is at once precise and obscure in Fanon’s French prose, a geography designated by proper place names and Arabic terms (douar, dechra). The banality of this practice of body-counting, Fanon suggests—banal in the sense that it comes as no surprise to the colonized—at once authorizes extreme violence on the part of the colons³ and renders such violence invisible before the law: “Bientôt sept ans de crimes en Algérie,” he adds, “et pas un Français qui ait été traduit devant une cour de justice pour le meurtre d’un Algérien” (89). That no French citizen had yet been prosecuted for murdering any Algerian was an effect of this politically calculated non-equivalence enforced by the state’s juridical institutions, which is why, Fanon explains, “aux yeux du colonisé, ces commissions n’existent pas” (89). In the colonized scene described by Fanon, justice appears to be a problem of translation and misrecognition instituted by force of law.
Fanon noticed this particular French equivocation at least a decade before composing *Les damnés de la terre* in 1961, and several years before he joined the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in 1956. Diagnosing a French non-recognition of ‘Arab’ or ‘Muslim’ humanity is the central preoccupation of some of Fanon’s earliest published texts, namely his essay “Le « syndrome nord africain»,” published just prior to *Peau noire masques blancs* in 1952. While Fanon’s analysis of the racialized hypervisibility that he experienced as a young Antillean medical student in France has attracted much critical attention (the ‘tiens, un nègre!’ passage from *Peau noire masques blancs* might be the most frequently cited of all Fanon’s prose), less has been said of his detailed phenomenology of a related but distinct form of racialized invisibility: “Arabes inaperçus... ignorés.. passées sous silence...subtilisés, dissimulés...quotidiennement niés, transformés en décor saharien” (‘Lettre,’ 56). Fanon’s analysis of this phenomenon is made newly relevant by contemporary forms of state violence that targets ‘Muslim’ bodies real and imagined—an important reminder that the postcolonial present is still haunted by French colonial violence and that the project of decolonization remains incomplete.

Three decades after Fanon’s death, the Italian critic Giorgio Agamben began to publish his own multi-volume study of modern state violence, the *Homo Sacer* project. Like Fanon—and in dialogue with work by Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Carl Schmitt—Agamben is concerned with the modern state’s exercise of power over life and death and its systematic production of absence (or included exclusion, the ‘state of exception’). In volume three of the *Homo Sacer* project Agamben assigns a proper name to what he identifies as the most extreme example of the state’s power to produce such absence. Agamben’s key term bears an uncanny but unremarked affinity with what Fanon called “arabes inaperçus.” This affinity merits sustained critical contemplation, which I begin
This chapter juxtaposes Agamben’s key term with Fanon’s to point out that Agamben’s near-total elision of European colonial violence from his influential *Homo Sacer* project reproduces the very blindspot that Fanon made the central object of his own early diagnosis and critique. Highlighting the rift between Agamben’s and Fanon’s analyses of modern violence also draws attention to an impasse inherited and reproduced in recent decades by U.S. scholarship, where the work of these two thinkers is not frequently brought together by the same critical projects (one notable exception is Achille Mbembe’s Fanon-inspired reworking of ‘biopolitics’ in his 2003 essay ‘Necropolitics’). This décalage raises a broader disciplinary question: why—despite shared preoccupations with problems of state violence, testimony, historiography, memory, and trauma—do the fields of holocaust and postcolonial studies intersect so tentatively? Because this political rift and new forms of this calculated blindness continue to define our own violent present, they demand our attention.

2 | Ironical Names

“(ce vocable inscrivait l’exclusivité dans laquelle la société coloniale nous avait tenus depuis 1830 et les différents décrets qui avaient annoncé la décrépitude dans laquelle nous devions être maintenus: Français-Musulmans, disaient les uns, musulmans à part entière, disaient les autres, sans qu’aucune de ces deux appellations puisse nous fournir l’illusion de quelque disponibilité juridique)”


Giorgio Agamben’s formulations of ‘the state of exception’ and ‘bare life’ have become touchstones for analyses of sovereign violence and biopolitics, yet it seems to have escaped note that Agamben’s use of these terms is marked by a peculiar oversight. While Agamben’s Eurocentrism has been redressed by scholars such as Achille Mbembe (“Necropolitics,” 2003), Ranjana Khanna (*Algeria Cuts*, 2008), Michael Rothberg (*Multidirectional Memory*, 2009), and Sylvie Thénault (*Violence Ordinaire dans l’Algérie Coloniale*,
2012), even his most careful readers do not comment on Agamben’s treatment of a word
that he takes from Primo Levi as the key to understanding politics and ethics after World
War II. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben designates the Nazi
concentration camp as the ‘new biopolitical nomos of the modern’ and singles out an epithet
that had previously appeared only in texts written by or about survivors of the camps: “Now
imagine the most extreme figure of the camp inhabitant,” he urges in the final passages of
*Homo Sacer.* “Primo Levi has described the person who in camp jargon was called ‘the
Muslim,’ *der Muselmann*—a being from whom humiliation, horror, and fear had so taken
away all consciousness and all personality as to make him absolutely apathetic (hence the
ironical name given to him).”

Agamben’s parenthetical ‘hence the ironical name’ communicates but does not
resolve anxiety about applying a variation of the Arabic word ‘muslim’ to such radically
dehumanized Jewish men. The logic of Agamben’s ‘hence’ is opaque at best. The ‘irony’ to
which he refers is surely the renaming of ‘Jew’ as ‘Muslim.’ His diction implies either that he
considers the association between absolute apathy and Muslims to be self-evident or that he
assumes that such an association would have appeared self-evident to those who assigned
the epithet; calling this substitution ‘ironic’ also suggests that a defining antagonism
distinguishes ‘Jew’ from ‘Muslim.’ While these associations and distinctions invite careful
historical reflection, neither in *Homo Sacer* nor in his subsequent *Remnants of Auschwitz: The
Witness and the Archive* does Agamben demonstrate such reflection, nor does he clarify just
what is ‘ironic’ about such a substitution. My reading of Agamben begins with this silence.

Indeed, it appears that the *Homo Sacer* project relies on Agamben’s not investigating
this particular ‘irony’ so that he can appropriate the term ‘muselman’ as proper name for the
lost witnesses to the Shoah and master figure of ‘bare life.’ Agamben’s thesis that Auschwitz
was a site of unprecedented biopolitical experimentation where “the most absolute conditio *inhumana* ever to appear on earth was realized” requires this spectral image of the
‘muselman,’ which he describes as a limit of a radically new kind.⁷ Agamben understands Auschwitz as the final step in a systematic procedure that reduced ‘Jew’ to bare life called ‘Muselmann’, a term that he uses to designate “not so much a limit between life and death…[but] the threshold between the human and the inhuman” (RA 55). This threshold orients Agamben’s argument concerning modern state violence and the paradox of testimony: “in Auschwitz,” he writes, “ethics begins precisely at the point where the *Muselmann*, the ‘complete witness,’ makes it forever impossible to distinguish between man and non-man” (RA 47). What Levi’s text leaves opaque and uncertain, Agamben clarifies, defines, and hyperbolizes so that the ‘Muslim’ appears in *Remnants of Auschwitz* sheared of its many other semantic valences and ambiguities. In Agamben’s text the word designates an ontological rather than historical condition of unwitnessable life subject to absolute power of the modern state. He positions the ‘muselman’ as key to the “hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we still live.”⁸

My aim is neither to produce a comprehensive genealogy of this word nor to solve the problem of its unsettling appearance at Auschwitz⁹, but rather to highlight an occluded context to Agamben’s master category in order to challenge a disciplinary décalage that continues to separate Holocaust from postcolonial studies. Agamben is not the first or only writer to use the term, but no other writer so elevates the ‘muselman’ as a theoretical exemplar, and few have attained Agamben’s authoritative status and critical appeal.¹⁰ Singling out his work may help to make explicit a broader epistemological and historiographic rift. Revelations of the calculated magnitude of Nazi violence transformed the thinking of European humanists and their inheritors, including analysts of modern sovereignty and
biopolitics such as Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Michel Foucault, and of course Giorgio Agamben—yet in an unsettling way the ghastly revelations came as no surprise to many thinkers familiar with European colonial violence. In his *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955), for example, Aimé Césaire articulated Nazi and colonial violence in unequivocal terms. Frantz Fanon cited Césaire’s provocation in his own writings for the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale just a few years later:

> What he (the bourgeois humanist of the twentieth century) cannot forgive Hitler for is not the crime in itself…it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the ‘Arabes’ of Algeria, the ‘coolies’ of India, and the ‘niggers’ of Africa.\(^{11}\)

While the semantic availability of a colonial juridical category as an epithet for the most abject victims of Nazi violence in 1944 might have prompted Agamben to explore affinities between Nazi and colonial violence along such lines, he does precisely the opposite. The enigmatic appearance of the word *muselmann* in the Nazi camps invites us to recognize and explore an articulation that Agamben’s rewriting of Levi effaces.

> Despite his keen interest in juridical categories (*homo sacer, testis, supertes, spondeo*), Agamben nowhere acknowledges that the use of the epithet ‘muselman’ at Auschwitz coincided with its simultaneous function as a juridical category of exception experimented with by the French in Algeria since at least its 1848 departmentalization—when the constitution of the French Second Republic annexed Algeria to France, carved it into three departments, and drew a juridical distinction between ‘les citoyens français’ (bearers of full citizenship rights) and ‘les sujets français’ (subject to military conscription, forced labor, a disciplinary system that included concentration camps\(^{12}\)) in order to facilitate redistribution and exploitation of Algeria’s immensely profitable arable land.\(^{13}\) The 1865 ‘Sénatus-consulte sur l'état des personnes et la naturalisation en Algérie’ further classified ‘sujets
français’ as either ‘indigènes israélites’ or ‘indigènes musulmans,’ and in 1870, the Crémieux decree extended full French citizenship to 30,000 ‘indigènes israélites’ in French Algeria but reserved the ambiguous juridical status of ‘sujet’ for millions of ‘indigènes musulmans’ until 1946. The word ‘musulman’ was never a transparent religious or cultural description in Algérie française, and it is not identical with ‘muslim’ although it operates as its translation. During World War II, ‘musulman’ was a French legal term still used to classify which bodies the French imperial nation-state would protect and which it could dispose.\(^{14}\)

The application of this word to the predominantly Jewish victims of Nazi genocide is provocative, yet the question pertinent to my inquiry is not ‘why \textit{this} name?’ Rather, I ask: why has its surprising resignification and sedimentation as a proper name for the lost victims of Auschwitz compelled so little historical and etymological reflection, and what are the consequences of this silence?\(^{15}\) I neither dismiss Agamben’s considerable insights nor wish to salvage usable strands of his theorizing for application to non-European scenes; I do not aim to resolve “the conundrum of Agamben’s absent colonial consciousness”\(^{16}\) or to explain his “inability to think the colonial encounter as biopolitical event.”\(^{17}\) By hewing closely to Agamben’s study of the ‘muselman’ in Remnants of Auschwitz, I track this bizarre omission in order to raise questions about the institutionalized blindnesses that continue to determine the priorities and periodizations that frame critical and literary studies concerned with modern forms of state violence.

Agamben’s narrow resignification of the word ‘muselman’ is made available to him in part by Levi’s own limited understanding of the term. Though he has ample opportunity not to be parochial, Agamben amplifies Levi’s opacities and omissions. According to Agamben (via Levi), the word ‘muselman’ was an epithet used by inmates of the Nazi death camps to refer to the most abject among them, those who had abandoned all hope of
survival and lurked at the bottom of the camp’s brutal hierarchy; it was the mark of a
distinction drawn by prisoners to distance themselves from the not-quite-living inmates
doomed for extermination. My claim is that Agamben’s theoretical inflation of this term
actually depends on his foreclosing ‘muselman’ subjects of European colonial violence from
the scene. Were he attuned to other functions of the word at the moment it appeared so
‘ironically’ in the jargon spoken by Auschwitz prisoners, surely he would not assimilate it as
he does.

Treating Agamben’s text as a case study and starting point, I follow the lead of
scholars like Hannah Feldman who object to the continued production of ‘postwar’
histories that treat 1945 as a decisive break only by leaving European colonial violence—in
this case, institutionalized French state terror against North Africans—outside the historical
and epistemological frames. Agamben participates in a long chain of transmission: he did not
invent this word, nor is he the first to remark on its disturbing function in the Nazi camps.
The term has since sedimented in trauma, testimony, and memory studies; it was spoken by
the famous survivor, novelist, and witness Ka-Tzetnik in his testimony at the Eichmann trial
in Jerusalem; it has entered dictionaries and encyclopedias; it has found new life on the
pages of modern Israeli literature in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English; and it serves a defining if
unacknowledged function in studies of testimony and of ‘the exception’ informed and
inspired by Agamben’s work. In a critical study of what he calls this “most visible and
invisible of words,” Gil Anidjar observes that although any reader familiar with Holocaust
literature published since 1945 has read, heard, and repeated the term ‘muselman’ or
‘muslim’ as a name for the most dehumanized victims of the Nazi camps, few appear to see
this “unreadable” name, let alone to comment on its full semantic range: “its particular
status, invisible yet everywhere.” If we resist reading the word as Agamben urges (as ‘the
true cipher of the camp’), then the elisions that attend his assiduous resignification present an opportunity to imagine a history of the present more complex than his limited frame permits.

To a reader familiar with the institutions of French empire, where the term’s function in juridical taxonomies both prefigured and coincided with its appearance in the deranged jargon of Auschwitz, the impact of the epithet ‘muselman’ as a name for the Nazis’ most abject victims is disorienting to say the least. Agamben’s is not an incidental silence but a consequential silencing symptomatic of broader problems in literary scholarship of recent decades, particularly in studies of trauma, testimony, and memory oriented primarily if not exclusively by examples drawn from the Holocaust archive, and more generally in scholarship that holds May 1945 as a decisive rupture in the history of modern state violence. From the perspective of millions in French-colonized North Africa, for example, May 8 1945 marked not the end but the intensification of institutional state violence and the organizing of anticolonial resistance that would soon culminate in a long war for national independence (1954-1962), and the time so often described as ‘post-war’ is not ‘after’ but rather war ongoing.

Such disjunctions continue to make it possible for many scholars to reflect on the traumas that mark European historiographies and literatures without feeling compelled to read European events and institutions as deeply implicated in, produced by, and unthinkable apart from colonial spaces and times—that is, as also belonging to colonized space and time. Assessing this problem may help to explain why so much scholarship on state violence and testimony, much of it critically informed by Agamben’s work, continues to draw its examples from the legal trials and literatures of the former colonizers rather than the formerly colonized. If such coincidences are addressed rather than ignored, then any discussion of
modern state violence and the ‘state of exception’ must reckon squarely with—rather than sideline—the legacies of European colonial terror.

3 | Ciphering Levi’s Secrets

“The army of ghosts that still vegetated in them was composed of Geheimnisträger, the bearers of secrets who must be disposed of…”


In *Remnants of Auschwitz* (ital. *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*), Agamben answers the invitation he had posed at the conclusion of *Homo Sacer* by recasting Levi’s “absolutely apathetic” figure of the ‘muselman’ as “the perfect cipher” of the Nazi death camps (HS 185, RA 55). Agamben understands the camp as site of an unprecedented biopolitical experiment made available to critical rumination by a figure that marks the very “impossibility of seeing” (RA 54). This spectral form slips from the edges of all frames in Agamben’s account, a “faceless center” and “central non-place” that defies perception and representation (RA 52). It appears in no photographs, Agamben notes, although he detects its image in sketches drawn by memory by Mauthausen-Gusen survivor Aldo Carpi and in about twenty seconds of footage from an English film shot just after the liberation of a concentration camp that Agamben identifies as Bergen-Belsen in 1945.23 The harrowing footage of mass graves and fields of corpses, he notes, was recorded to document Nazi atrocities for the public and for future legal trials, but these are not the frames that attract his attention. Agamben describes another sequence in detail:

At one point, however, the camera lingers almost by accident on what seem to be living people, a group of prisoners crouched on the ground or wandering on foot like ghosts. It lasts only a few seconds, but it is still long enough for the spectator to realize that they are either *Muselmänner* who have survived by some miracle or, at least, prisoners very close to the state of the *Muselmänner*. With the exception of Carpi’s drawings, which he did from memory, this is perhaps the sole image of the *Muselmänner* we have. Nevertheless, the same cameraman who had until then
patiently lingered over naked bodies, over the terrible ‘dolls’ dismembered and stacked one on top of another, could not bear the sight of these half-living beings; he immediately began once again to show the cadavers. As Elias Canetti has noted, a heap of dead bodies is an ancient spectacle, one which has often satisfied the powerful. But the sight of the Muselmänner is an absolutely new phenomenon, unbearable to human eyes.

(RA 51, my emphasis)

Agamben’s study repeatedly underscores both the novelty and inscrutability of the ‘Muselmänner’ phenomenon. He cites Carpi’s complaint—“No one wants camp scenes and figures; no one wants to see the Muselmann” (Carpi in Agamben, 50)—and draws from Levi and Hannah Arendt, among many others, to refine his point that the apparition of half-living ghosts called ‘Muselmänner’ at Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen heralded not the mass-murder of human beings but rather a new mode of state violence that produced bodies so stripped of political status and human identity that their elimination could not be properly called murder or even death: “In Auschwitz, people did not die; rather, corpses were produced” (RA 72).

Agamben cordons off Auschwitz as exemplary in this sense: “there is a point at which human beings…cease to be human. This point is the Muselmann, and the camp is his exemplary site” (55, my emphasis); “This…is the particular horror that the Muselmann brings to the camp and that the camp brings to the world” (70, my emphasis). Wherever this thesis repeats in Remnants of Auschwitz, the ‘muselman’ is key:

Before being a death camp, Auschwitz is the site of an experiment that remains unthought today, an experiment beyond life and death in which the Jew is transformed into a Muselmann and the human being into a non-human. And we will not understand what Auschwitz is if we do not first understand who or what the Muselmann is—if we do not learn to gaze with him upon the Gorgon. (52)

Agamben treats this aporetic figure as cipher, both in the sense of ‘secret code’ and ‘absence.’ Speculating that the Nuremberg (1945-1946) and Eichmann (1961-1962) trials were “responsible for the conceptual confusion that, for decades, has made it impossible to think through Auschwitz” (19), Agamben claims this absent witness as key to understanding
what is new about such violence: “If we give the name ‘Levi’s paradox’ to the statement ‘the Muselmann is the complete witness’,” he writes, “then understanding Auschwitz—if such a thing is possible—will coincide with understanding the sense and nonsense of this paradox” (82). Whereas Levi’s text leaves the ‘Muselmann’s’ status uncertain, Agamben reformulates its ambiguity as master key to the paradox of modernity.

Agamben’s formulation of ‘Levi’s paradox’ amplifies particular aspects of Levi’s account. Levi first mentioned the ‘muselmann’ in his memoir of incarceration at the Buna-Monowitz lager (one of 44 Auschwitz satellite camps), translated by Stuart Woolf as Survival at Auschwitz yet first published as Se questo è un uomo in 1947. This text’s only reference to the ‘muselman’ appears in a section of a chapter titled “The Drowned and the Saved” in which Levi describes the brutal hierarchy among camp prisoners: “But in the Lager things are different,” writes Levi. “Here the struggle to survive is without respite, because everyone is desperately and ferociously alone. If some Null Achtzehn vacillates, he will find no one to extend a helping hand; on the contrary, someone will knock him aside, because it is in no one’s interest that there be one more ‘mussulman’…” (62). The Simon and Schuster English translation of Levi’s text inserts a footnote at this point in the text; the Crane Books edition inserts the footnote into Levi’s own prose as a parenthetical clause. It reads: “(This word ‘Muselmann’ I do not know why, was used by the old ones of the camp to describe the weak, the inept, those doomed to selection).” The word appears once more in the subsequent paragraph: “Whosoever does not know how to become an ‘Organisator,’ ‘Kombinator,’ ‘Prominent’ (the savage eloquence of these words!) soon becomes a ‘musselman’” (SA 63). The English editions vary their spellings of the word; in the Italian it appears as «mussulmano», at first enclosed by guillemets and then without. Levi’s text leaves diffuse the status and significance of the term. While this orthographic, typographic, and
semitic variability suggest instability and uncertainty, Agamben makes this very instability signify.

Levi’s *The Drowned and the Saved*—the last of his many texts, published the year before his own suicide in 1987 and translated in 1988—is preoccupied by the problem posed by the ‘muselman’ for the practices of testimony and historiography, a problem that Agamben presents as central to the testimonial paradox at stake in *Remnants of Auschwitz*. Levi describes a narrative conundrum that took him four decades to see clearly: “One can today definitely affirm that the history of the Lagers has been written almost exclusively by those who, like myself, never fathomed them to the bottom,” he writes. “Those who did so did not return, for their capacity for observation was paralyzed by suffering and incomprehension.” In a section of his text concerning language in the camps, Levi again cites the word: “Common to all Lagers,” he writes, “was the term *Muselmänn*, ‘Muslim’, given to the irreversibly exhausted, worn-out prisoner close to death” (*DS* 98). Nowhere does Levi speculate about the origin of the term, although he does register that he remains unpersuaded by the usual reasons given for its use: “Two explanations for it have been advanced, neither very convincing: fatalism; and the head bandages that could resemble a turban” (*DS* 98). Agamben reads *The Drowned and the Saved* as haunted by this lacuna. His citations from Levi both emphasize the spectral quality of Levi’s memory and echo his own description of the ‘ghosts’ filmed at Bergen-Belsen: “They crowd my my memory with their faceless presence,” writes Levi, cited by Agamben, “and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen” (*DS* 90, in Agamben 44).
Agamben’s portrait of the ‘muselman’ as cipher is surely informed by his reading of Levi’s preface to *The Drowned and the Saved*, which explicitly mentions an ‘army of ghosts’ as both the great absence and the great secret of the Nazi camps. Levi’s preface begins with a discussion of the testimonial and historiographic aporia deliberately plotted and carried out by the Nazi regime and integral to its logic. He offers a compelling account of the Third Reich’s concerted (if failed) effort to destroy material evidence of its crime, especially in 1944 with the imminent end of the war in sight. Agamben transcribes Levi’s own full citation of Simon Wiesenthal’s *The Murderers are Among Us*, transmitting the cynical admonition of SS soldiers to camp prisoners in the final days of the war:

> However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed: they will say that they are the exaggerations of Allied propaganda and will believe us, who will deny everything, and not you. We will be the ones to dictate the history of the Lagers. (DS 11-12; in RA 157)

As Levi notes, the Nazis blew up the Auschwitz gas chambers and ovens, but left visible ruins; they razed the Warsaw ghetto to the ground, but historians dug deeper; they burned the Lager archives and forced prisoners to exhume mass graves, to burn the corpses on pyres and to crush human bones to dust—yet material evidence remained to be read by future historians, collected and preserved as testament to prevent such atrocities from recurring.

In their systematic fabrication of a future absence, the SS also undertook what Levi calls “the murderous and apparently insane transfers [of prisoners] with which the history of the Nazi camps came to an end during the first months of 1945: the survivors of Maidanek to Auschwitz, those of Buchenwald to Bergen-Belsen, the women of Ravensbruck to
Schwerin” (*DS* 14). Levi pinpoints the inherent logic of these ‘apparently insane’ transfers:

“The SS command posts and the security services then took the greatest care to ensure that no witnesses survived” (14). Many exhausted prisoners died in this way just before liberation, yet their physical extermination wasn’t the purpose of the death marches, according to Levi: “It did not matter that they might die along the way; what really mattered was that they should not tell their story” (14). That is, the multitude of still-living prisoners represented an army of future witnesses to the crimes of the Third Reich. Because their potential testimonies posed a threat to the authority of that state to control the production of history, all trace of these inmates had to vanish—much like the physical gas chambers, the incriminating human remains, and the camp archives. Levi contemplates the nature of this threat posed to the Nazi regime by the inhabitants of its camps:

In fact, after having functioned as centers of political terror, then as death factories, and subsequently (or simultaneously) as immense, ever renewed reservoirs of slave labor, the Lagers had become dangerous for a moribund Germany because they contained *the secret of the Lagers themselves, the greatest crime in the history of humanity*. The army of ghosts that still vegetated in them was composed of *Geheimnisträger*, the bearers of secrets who must be disposed of… (*DS* 14, my emphasis)

Mass-murder is not the ‘secret of the camps’ that appears to concern Levi here. As Agamben notes, Levi does not fixate on the spectacle of mass graves and corpses that emerged from the camps at the end of the war; the crime that concerns him appears to be not what the camps made visible so much as what that they were designed to obscure. The passage above suggests that material evidence did not threaten “moribund Germany” nearly so much as the yet-to-be-killed “army of ghosts” whose reservoir of labor power had been extracted but whose undead bodies still “vegetated” within the walls of the camps. Levi calls this population of ghost *Geheimnisträger*, and glosses the word—a German compound of ‘Geheimnis’ (mystery, secret) and ‘Träger’ (bearer, pillar, beam, truss, repository, porter)—as ‘bearer of secrets.’ *Geheimnisträger* denotes a person with security clearance who is entrusted
with official secrets of state, a sense affirmed by Levi’s suggestion that the prisoners were killed on death-marches in 1944 precisely because their marginally living bodies were material evidence that could expose the great secret of the state’s mass-produced administrative murder. Agamben completes the semantic link loosely suggested by Levi’s preface, fusing ‘muselman’ with Geheimnisträger in his formulation of the paradox of this absent witness.

Remnants of Auschwitz depicts Agamben as reader and rewriter of Levi: “And Levi,” writes Agamben, “who bears witness to the drowned, speaking in their stead, is the cartographer of this new terra ethica, the implacable land-surveyor of Muselman land” (RA 69). Citations culled from Levi’s two texts riddle Agamben’s own sentences as he embellishes and transforms Levi’s formulations. “One of the paraphrases by which Levi designates the Muselman is ‘he who has seen the Gorgon,’” writes Agamben (53), or: “As always, it is Levi who finds the most just and, at the same time, the most terrible formula: ‘One hesitates,’ he writes, ‘to call their death death’” (70). In places, entire pages of Remnants of Auschwitz are dedicated to extended citations from Levi (see 33-34; 44). On these pages, the word ‘muselman’ frequently appears untranslated and italicized (muselman) in the English translation of Agamben’s text, and either in citations or between quotation marks («musulmano») in the original Italian and the French. However, as Agamben gradually familiarizes the reader with this word, it also appears in the text stripped (if inconsistently) of these distinguishing typographic markers; that is, Agamben domesticates and naturalizes the word as a proper name.27

The passage in which Agamben first introduces this word to his own text clearly illustrates the process of lexical assimilation at work in his reading of Levi. He channels Levi here, repeating and transposing Levi’s title (‘The Drowned and the Saved’) and phrasings
into his own theoretical scheme:

The ‘true’ witnesses, the ‘complete witnesses,’ are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness. They are those who ‘touched bottom’: the Muslims, the drowned. The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony. (RA 34; my italics)

This transposition is even more evident in the Italian, where Levi’s *I sommersi e i salvati* is reinvented by Agamben’s ‘i musulmani, i sommersi’ (31).

Agamben’s treatment of the term ‘muselman’ is especially peculiar in contrast to the philological attention he affords each of the other terms in the critical lexicon of *Remnants of Auschwitz*. The text’s first chapter opens with a series of etymological studies of words such as ‘witness,’ ‘testimony,’ ‘responsibility,’ ‘martyr,’ ‘holocaust,’ and ‘euphemism.’ With reference to the inadequacy of the testimony on display at the Eichmann and Nuremberg trials, Agamben notes that two Latin nouns translate as ‘witness’: *testis* names the “person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties is in the position of the third party” while *supertes* “designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it”—Agamben designates Levi a paradigmatic witness in both senses (RA 17). He also introduces the term *spondeo*, a Latin verb that is source of the juridical and ethical term ‘responsibility’ (21), and discusses the Greek term *martis*, cautioning that “what happened in the camps has little to do with martyrdom” and pointing out that the concepts of martyrdom and witnessing are etymologically linked in Greek (26-27).

Agamben devotes several pages to tracing the semantic migration of the ‘incorrect term’ holocaust (from the Latin, *holocaustum*, ‘completely burned’), which he rejects for its gradually acquired meaning of “supreme sacrifice in the sphere of a complete devotion to sacred and superior motives” and for its long history as a polemic against the Jews (RA 31). “Not only does the term imply an unacceptable equation between crematoria and altars,” he
writes, “it also constitutes a semantic heredity that is from its inception anti-Semitic, which is why we will never make use of the term” (31). Agamben likewise rejects the ‘unspeakable’ character of Auschwitz on the grounds that _euphemein_ describes a form of sacral worship, so that “to say that Auschwitz is ‘unsayable’ or ‘incomprehensible’ is equivalent to _euphemein_, to adoring in silence, as one does with a god” (33). The chapter concludes by contemplating the indecipherable syllables ‘mass-klo, matisklo’ spoken by the child Hurbinek in Auschwitz (see 37-39) and by introducing the ‘muselman’ motif for the first time—which is also the title and problematic of the text’s second chapter. This chapter’s opening sentence signals Agamben’s ambition: “The untestifiable has a name” (41).

Given his assiduous attention to every other term in his lexicon, it is striking that Agamben offers no etymological or historical information about the word ‘muselman’ beyond its function in the jargon of the Lagers. Given that he dedicates an entire chapter to defining and explicating the word, including a brief discussion of “the uncertainty as to the semantic and disciplinary field in which the term should be situated” (RA 45-6), this omission even more stunning. Even a glance at the word’s etymology provides a rough feel for its temporal and geographic migration from Arabic (muʿālim, muṣalmani) and Persian (muṣulmān) through Ottoman Turkish (müslümân, müslümân), Turkish (müslüman), post-classical Latin (musulmanus, 1588), Italian (musulmano, 1557), Middle French (musulman, 1553), French (musulman, 1562), Spanish (musulman, 18th c.), Dutch (muzelman, 1622), German (Muselman, Muselmann, Musulmann, 17th c.), Swedish (musulman 1658), and English (musulman), and gives a sense of the magnitude of this lacuna in Agamben’s account. No trace of this history appears anywhere in _Remnants of Auschwitz_ nor does mention of the term’s use outside Nazi Germany during the mid-twentieth century. The term enshrined as foundational is presented by Agamben as if it lacks etymology or history. The distinct but
dubious impression fostered by Remnants of Auschwitz is that a limit-case for absolute
subjection called something like ‘muslim’ appeared in the modern world at Auschwitz
between 1939 and 1945.

The text’s second chapter puzzles briefly over the origins of the ‘ironical name.’
Agamben claims that the epithet was specific to Auschwitz—Mauthausen inmates called the
most abject among them “swimmers,” he writes, while at Neuengame they were “camels,” at
Dachau “cretins,” at Buchenwald “tired sheikhs,” and at Ravensbrück, “Muselweiber,” or
female ‘Muslims’ (R-4 44). 29 He singles out ‘muselman’ from this suggestive cluster and
makes an effort to explain its selection as an epithet by noting that “the most likely
explanation of the term” derives from the “literal meaning of the Arabic word muslim: one
who submits unconditionally to the will of God” (45).

This is not an explanation. It is a problematic association that merely repeats the
tautology of Agamben’s earlier ‘hence’ without clarifying—let alone considering—why such
extreme abjection and suffering might prompt the word ‘muselman’ in the imaginations of
the prisoners who generated and transmitted the epithet. Agamben’s gloss of the Arabic
word ‘muslim’ is especially disconcerting not just for its reductive Orientalism, but because
Agamben here appears to endorse the very notion of sanctified sacrifice that, as he
judiciously points out, qualifies ‘holocaust’ as anti-Semitic. Why does Agamben
unequivocally reject ‘holocaust’ (“we will never make use of the term,” [45]) yet permit
‘muselman’ to pass without comparable scrutiny, instead consecrating it as the central
category of his analysis of modern European state violence?

As the ‘muselman’ is resignified by Remnants of Auschwitz as “the ‘complete witness’”
who “makes it forever impossible to distinguish between man and non-man” (47), the
disturbing rhetorical impact of the word’s double-sounding either intensifies or dulls with
repetition depending on how readily a reader accepts Agamben’s theoretical and rhetorical strategy. It is astonishing that Agamben appears to recognize just one of the myriad ironies that inhere in his use of the enigmatic and troubled word: “In any case,” he writes, “it is certain that, with a kind of ferocious irony, the Jews knew that they would not die at Auschwitz as Jews”—but, rather, as Muslims (RA 45).

The motifs that emerge in the second chapter of Remnants of Auschwitz call attention to ironies that Agamben does not explore. He introduces the figure of the ‘muselman’ via a series of long citations transcribed not only from texts by Primo Levi, but also Elie Wiesel, Jean Améry, Aldo Carpi, Zdzisław Ryn and Stanisław Kłodziński, and Wolfgang Sofsky. In this accumulation of suggestive detail, a reader might notice that all of these commentators respond to the persistent question (why that word?) by citing Orientalist tropes and images: Améry notes that the ‘muslim’ “no longer had room in his consciousness for the contrasts of good or bad, noble or base, intellectual or unintellectual” (in RA 41); Carpi calls them “mummy-men, the living dead” (41); Ryn and Kłodziński write that the “Muslim didn’t defend himself. With the first kick, he folded in two, and after a few more he was dead” (42), and further explain that “seeing them from afar, one had the impression of seeing Arabs praying. This image was the origin of the term used at Auschwitz for people dying of malnutrition” (43). Agamben also cites The Encyclopaedia Judaica, which offers: “Used mainly at Auschwitz, the term appears to derive from the typical attitude of certain deportees, that is, staying crouched on the ground, legs bent in the Oriental fashion, faces rigid as masks” (45); he cites Wolfgang Sofsky’s citation of Marsalek’s association of “the typical movements of the Muselmänner, the swaying motions of the upper part of the body, with Islamic rituals” (45). Agamben summarizes these observations: “We have seen that to be between life and death is one of the traits constantly attributed to the Muselmann, the ‘walking corpse’ par
excellence. Confronted with his disfigured face, his ‘Oriental’ agony, the survivors hesitate to attribute to him even the mere dignity of the living” (70). Agamben does not interrogate what exactly is ‘Oriental’ about such agony, abjection, and lack of dignity; he offers no critical reflection on the European Orientalism at play in the construction of the ‘muselman’ by both camp inmates and writers and historians of the Holocaust. The ready ease of such associations suggests that the word ‘muselman’ already signified not-quite-living when it assumed its new status as a camp epithet. Agamben repeats this equation without questioning it.

Thomas Keneally’s Booker Prize-winning novel Schindler’s Ark (1982) (later adapted as an Academy Award-winning 1993 feature film of similar title) comes closer to invoking specific historical experiences rather than ahistorical clichés, but Agamben does not cite this example: “The term was camp jargon,” writes Keneally, “based on people’s memory of newsreels of famine in Muslim countries, for a prisoner who had crossed the borderline that separated the ravenous living from the good-as-dead.” It is no stretch to assume that some prisoners of Nazi camps had seen photographs or perhaps read Albert Camus’s chronicles of the famine that devastated the Kabyle region of Algeria in 1939, but Agamben does not allude to ‘famine in Muslim countries’ in his discussion. He draws a tight geographic and temporal circle around this figure of ‘bare life’ about which he underscores two points: first, that ethics and politics begins only once ‘we’ come to understand “who or what the muselmann is” (RA 47), and second, that its production was a radically unprecedented phenomenon that transformed ‘our’ modernity ‘after’ the catastrophe of World War II. If this condition was so unprecedented, as Agamben insists, why should an epithet be so ready at hand to name it? What aporia makes it possible for Agamben not to notice these semantic clues, and to silence rather than sound out these historical connections?
Despite his insistence on the unprecedented status of the Nazi genocide, Agamben’s descriptions of this violence routinely point to precedents that he does not explore. For example, in the concluding chapter of *Homo Sacer* titled “The Camp as ‘Nomos’ of the Modern,” Agamben briefly mentions the colonial history of the concentration camp, noting that the first such institutions were either built by the Spanish in Cuba 1896 or by the English during the Boer wars (*HS* 166). Agamben does not examine these cases, but leaves them in the margin of his study. Likewise, when Agamben claims that Hitler had formulated, in 1937, “an extreme biopolitical concept for the first time” (*RA* 85) by instituting the principle of ‘volkloser Raum’ (a space emptied of people), he manages to produce sentences like the following without considering evident parallels with the techniques of settler colonialism:

Hitler’s ‘peopleless space’ instead designates a fundamental biopolitical intensity… that can persist in every space and through which people pass into populations and populations pass into Muselmanner. *Volkloser Raum*, in other words, names the driving force of the camp understood as a biopolitical machine that, once established in a determinate geographical space, transforms it into an absolute biopolitical space. (86)

Strategically isolating the case of Hitler’s Germany, Agamben theorizes ‘muselmannization’ as a systematic stripping of legal subjectivity and crossed thresholds that mark degrees of banishment from political and social community. He hyperbolizes and ontologizes Levi’s descriptions of the ‘Muselman’, transforming this word into a sanctified name for the secret that he seeks to make legible:

If, in the jargon of Nazi bureaucracy, whoever participated in the ‘Final Solution’ was called a *Geheimnisträger*, a keeper of secrets, the *Muselman* is the absolutely unwitnessable, invisible ark of biopower. Invisible because empty, because the Muselmann is nothing other than the *volkloser Raum*, the space empty of people at the center of the camp that, in separating all life from itself, marks the point in which the citizen passes into the *Staatsangehörig* of non-Aryan descent, the non-Aryan into the Jew, the Jew into the deportee, and, finally, the deported Jew beyond himself into the Muselmann, that is, into a bare, unassignable and unwitnessable life. (*RA* 156-7)
Even as word ‘muselman’ emerges in Agamben’s prose stripped of its medieval and premodern history and severed from its precedent and coincident significance in French colonial taxonomy, it retains a troubling doubleness, as if it is haunted by what Agamben’s belated making-visible leaves so utterly out of sight. Agamben’s sentences become difficult to read without sounding out the unspoken heredity of the term. Why should a condition of ‘unwitnessable’ bare life—the threshold where human becomes indistinguishable from inhuman, where the state exercises its power to determine life that can be sacrificed from that which can simply be terminated—already have had a ready-made name available to Auschwitz prisoners in 1944 that appears so natural to Agamben in 1998 that he does not consider himself obligated to mention, let alone to learn from and think through, its history?

Agamben’s oversight is not merely an individual or idiosyncratic failing. This engimatic name is the central critical category in *Remnants of Auschwitz* and an object of sustained ethical and political reflection for Agamben, yet his reformulation of ‘Levi’s paradox’ relies on a semantic sleight that renders the ‘muselman’ visible at Auschwitz but not Algiers or Aïn el-Bey. This appropriation of the term reflects an historiographic conundrum produced by colonial violence and maintained by postcolonial amnesia that continues to determine what can appear to whom as a recognizable subject of historical knowledge and ethical reflection and what cannot.
“The Muslims, the drowned”

“The ‘true’ witnesses, the ‘complete witnesses,’ are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness. They are those who ‘touched bottom’: the Muslims, the drowned.”


Recall this passage in *Remnants of Auschwitz* in which the ‘ironical name’ appears assimilated and translated with no typographic trace of its passage: “The ‘true’ witnesses, the ‘complete’ witnesses are those who did not bear witness and who could not bear witness. They are those who ‘touched bottom’: the Muslims, the drowned” (34). This assertion follows Agamben’s discussion of the ‘conceptual confusion’ generated by the post-Holocaust trials at Nuremberg and in particular the trial “in Jerusalem in 1961 that ended with the hanging of Eichmann” (19) for complicity in Nazi crimes against humanity. This is a truly ironic instance in which to fully naturalize the appropriated word as if it has been stripped of the signifiying trace any other ‘muslims.’

The trial that began after Adolf Eichmann was extradited from Argentina by Israeli intelligence in May 1960 and concluded with his execution in Jerusalem on June 1, 1962 serves a defining function for Agamben, as it does for many scholars of the Nazi genocide. The Eichmann proceedings gave Holocaust survivors a platform to narrate their suffering to the world from the witness stand at the Jerusalem House of Justice, and it gave the new state
an opportunity to exact vengeance, if not justice, for the Nazis’ victims. Observing the profound inadequacy of this process to the catastrophe for which it sought to account, Agamben reiterates his case: the absolute witnesses to the crimes of the Third Reich could never take the stand in Jerusalem in 1961. This is a point that Agamben appears to share with that trial’s most famous witness, the survivor and writer Yechiel Dinur (‘Ka-Tzetnik 135633’), who referred to the ‘Muselmanner’ of Auschwitz just before fainting in the courtroom and whose depiction of these haunting figures in his 1961 novel underscores their mute illegibility. 

Agamben argues that the foreclosure of these ‘drowned’ witnesses—rendered absent to history and to the law—itself signals the unprecedented magnitude of Nazi violence.

Had Agamben traced the epithet’s other life as a juridical category of French empire or contemplated legacies of May 1945 from the perspective of those living under colonial law, he might have revised his thesis or at least reconsidered this particular sentence. At precisely the moment that Ka-Tzetnik narrated his account from the witness stand at the House of Justice in Jerusalem, the French state was waging the last brutal campaign of its long counter-revolutionary war to preserve the idea and the institutions of Algérie française. On 17 October 1961—as witnesses took the stand in Jerusalem, and as construction was underway for the Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation on Ile de la Cité in the heart of Paris—at least thirty-thousand unarmed Algerian men, women, and children took to the Paris streets to protest a curfew imposed by police commander Maurice Papon on only Algerian residents of the city. The text of Papon’s order targeted these residents with variations of the old colonial category, banning ‘travailleurs musulmans algériens,’ ‘français musulmans,’ or ‘français musulmans d’Algérie’ from public space after 8:30 in the evening. In reaction to the massive nonviolent demonstration organized to contest this racist curfew,
the Paris police attacked Algerian protestors wherever they gathered on the grand boulevards and subway stations in the heart of the city. Police chased, beat, arrested, loaded demonstrators onto busses and confined them to stadiums in the banlieue, where many were killed. Throughout Paris, police threw battered and broken Algerian bodies into the Seine. Drowned corpses floated to the river’s surface for days—in the calculated absence of official record or acknowledgement of these murders, the image of drowned bodies floating in the Seine became a metonym for the occulted massacre, as reflected by the title of Anne Tristan’s collection of photographs _Le silence du fleuve_ (1991). If Agamben had registered such contexts of the term ‘muselman’ as he reflected on the structuring foreclosure at the heart of testimony, then he surely he could not refer to Auschwitz’s ‘muslims’ as ‘the drowned’ without reckoning with a host of other ferocious ironies.

The police murder of Algerian demonstrators on the streets of Paris on 17 October 1961 is surely one of the most contested and obscured events in modern French history, although it can be argued that such violence was neither exceptional nor without precedent in the history of _La plus grand france_. Due in part to a police-ordered media blackout imposed by Maurice Papon, the repression went deliberately unrecorded at the time. It did not become a subject for academic historiography until the mid-1990s, when the state-controlled archive was finally opened and when historians Jim House and Neil MacMaster began research for their _Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, and Memory_ (2006). A number of texts concerned with documenting the massacre were published, or almost published, before the 1990s, yet most of these were censored, seized upon publication, circulated clandestinely, or published outside France, notably by the FLN news organ _El Mondjavid_. House and MacMaster point out that 17 October 1961 was by far the most violent state repression of an unarmed demonstration ever to take place in mainland France—and that
more people died in Paris that day than died at Tiananmen Square in 1989—yet the event has been subject to such historiographic delay and official disavowal that until recently it was relegated to the margins and footnotes of histories of state violence in the 20th century, if it was mentioned at all. Because the historiography of 17 October 1961 did not begin to be written until the 1990s, the same time that Agamben composed Remnants of Auschwitz, it is possible that Agamben did not know anything about it—yet this does not explain why he ignores the connection implied by the capacious term so central to his study.

A conspicuous irony here is not that certain Nazi victims, most of them Jewish, were reduced to ‘Muslims’ at Auschwitz, but that Agamben’s attention to this inscrutable figure blinds him to what else the word might bring to light. The problem is not simply that Agamben fails to include colonial scenes and figures in his frame, but that he does not notice the colonial imagery already spliced into that frame. The epithet links Nazi with European imperial violence, but as Agamben founds his ethics on the site where ‘Jews’ were transformed into the ambiguously-human figures that he accepts ‘Muslims’ already were, certain victims come to appear (even in their haunting absence) in place of those whose absence never gains the status of an ethical or political problem. Had he read differently—perhaps by asking about the nature of the link between ‘muselman’ and radical dispossession—then Remnants of Auschwitz and Homo Sacer might be different texts. Perhaps Agamben would not have described those terrible frames of film footage shot at liberated Bergen Belsen in May 1945 without also being haunted by the French state’s mass killing of Algerians at Sétif, Guelma, and Kherrata that took place during those very same days. Perhaps he would have included both the Eichmann trial and the occulted massacre of 17 October 1961 in his puzzling over the impossible imperative of testimony. Agamben misses this opportunity. His reading of the ‘muselman’ reinforces a limit that determines certain
lives grievable and cases exemplary—a rhetorical gesture with discomfiting proximity to what Frantz Fanon described, concerning the French in Algeria in 1961, as “this reasoning that so arithmetically forsees the disappearance of colonized people.”

Agamben’s claim may be more apt than he appears to know: the absent witnesses to the horror of state violence in the twentieth century may indeed be those ‘drowned’ ‘Muslims’ who can not testify. Agamben’s own account of the paradox of testimony is troubled by remnants of other Muslims that enter his study of modern state violence only under the sign of assiduous erasure; these lost figures never emerge as subjects of ethical or political reflection in his account. If such Muslims appear absent from Agamben’s picture, surely this is not because they cannot speak, but because they cannot be heard.

5 | Seeing ‘Muslims’

“Au ras du pavé on les appelle les ratons, les bougnoules; dans les salons, l’administration, les Nord-Africains, les Français musulmans, ou même déjà les immigrés. Algériens? Jamais! Ce serait nommer l’évidence, reconnaître qu’un peuple a le droit de s’arracher à l’écrasement colonial.”

—Anne Tristan


Fanon’s observations concerning the ‘arithmetric erasure’ of colonized Algerians (he notably avoids the term ‘musulman’) are of course not limited to *Les damnés de la terre* (1962). In numerous essays, some first published in *L’esprit* and *El-moudjahid* between 1952 and 1959 and others unpublished (or published unsigned) until they appeared in the posthumous collection *Pour la Revolution Africaine* (1964), Fanon describes the spatial, material, and epistemological regimes of French empire.

We might note that Fanon’s phenomenology, like Agamben’s, is replete with tropes
of blindness and spectrality. As a young French soldier traveling across colonized North Africa in 1944, as a medical resident in Lyon in 1952, as head of psychiatry at the Blida-Joinville hospital just outside Algiers when the armed struggle began in 1954, and while writing for *El-Moudjahid* from Tunisia in 1959 and 1960, Fanon recognized and described what Agamben’s belated making-visible renders so obscure: before the Nazi’s victims were systematically reduced to bare life named something like ‘muslim,’ the French Republic had systematically produced a vast and spectral subaltern population of some 10 million governed since the early 19th century by a complex of laws called the ‘code de l’indigénat’ that classified colonial subjects as French but not as citizens, an ambiguous ‘third zone’ indexed by a series of historically specific and shifting terms, including: ‘indigène,’ ‘Arabe,’ ‘mon z’ami,’ ‘raton,’ ‘fellah,’ ‘bicot,’ ‘Mohamed,’ ‘Fatma,’ and—the technical term—‘musulman.’ Fanon confronts this problem in two texts: in his undated ‘Lettre à un français,’ published in *Pour la révolution Africaine* just before his 1956 resignation letter from the Blida hospital; and in one of his earliest publications, ‘Le «syndrome nord africain»,’ written in 1952 when he was a young medical intern fresh from clinical experience around Rue Moncey in Lyon, home to a large population of North African laborers.

As its title suggests, the ‘Lettre à un français’ is composed in the form of direct address. It is a letter addressed intimately to a French citizen of Algeria, a pied noir; no name is given in the letter, nor is any indication that it was intended for a specific recipient. Likely dictated aloud, as was Fanon’s style, the text appears as verse. Through its use of familiar pronouns, its satirical anticipation of its recipient’s reaction, and its dramatic staging of its speaker’s urgent voice, the text generates a sense of aggressive intimacy, as if Fanon himself shouts and gesticulates from the page: “Je veux ma voix brutale, je ne la veux pas belle, je ne la veux pas pure, je ne la veux pas de toutes dimensions” (57). This narrator offers to the
departing pied-noir and his wife—who, it seems, have decided to retreat to France as the Algerian liberation war became increasingly grisly in the wake of the Philippeville massacre of 1955—an exposition of the founding injustice of Algérie française. Fanon narrates as if describing a landscape to a blind person: “J’ai vu ton essentielle ignorance des choses de ce pays,” he writes, “Des choses que je t’expliquerai” (55).

In Fanon’s description, the Algerian landscape is populated by faint figures that never quite come into focus. They are called ‘Arabe,’ a word that Fanon repeats like an incantation or an accusation. He writes:

Arabes inaperçus.
Arabes ignorés.
Arabes passées sous silence.
Arabes subtilisés, dissimulés.
Arabes quotidiennement niés, transformés en décor saharien. Et toi mêlé à ceux :
Qui n’ont jamais serré le main à un Arabe.
Jamais bu le café.
Jamais parlé du temps qu’il fait avec un Arabe.
A tes côtés les Arabes.
Ecartés les Arabes.
Sans effort rejetés les Arabes.
Confinés les Arabes.
Ville indigène écrasée.
Ville d’indigènes endormis.
Il n’arrive jamais rien chez les Arabes.

Toute cette lèpre sur ton corps.

Tu partiras. Mais toutes ces questions, ces questions sans réponse. Le silence conjugué de 800,000 Français, ce silence ignorant, ce silence innocent.

Et 9,000,000 d’hommes sous ce linceul de silence.

(56-7)

The first lines point out the French failure to perceive ‘Arabes’ as fellow human beings, while the last lines introduce a provocative metaphor—a ‘death shroud’—for this epistemological and ethical blindspot. The letter repeats four words in particular: ‘millions,’ ‘arabes,’ ‘fellaḥ,’ and ‘indigène.’ The cumulative effect of these repeated French epithets for
the colonized Algerian population evokes the bureaucratic textuality of a census list or civil registry, as if Fanon’s enumeration might compel the Frenchman to simply perceive as suffering precisely that to which he has become so inured: “Millions de donne-moi un morceau de pain. Millions d’illettrés « ne sachant pas signer, ne signe, signons ». Millions d’empreintes digitales sur les procès-verbaux qui conduisent en prison” (57-58). This enumeration does not singularize. On the one hand, iterating the word ‘Arabe’ generates a numbing, homogenizing effect, as if to echo the discursive erasure of racial epithets and euphemisms used by French citizens to distinguish themselves from the subalternized millions upon whose labor the colony depended. Repetition also insists that such normalized violence be felt by the reader—“pour que tu penses: c’est triste, il faut que cela cesse” (58)—and ironizes the incommensurability of ‘Arabe’ and ‘Homme’ by sounding out a limit whereby no factor of ‘Arabe’ can add up to human. The number 9,000,000 puts a sharp point on Fanon’s critique of post-1945 humanist universalism: this figure tests the selective perception of French citizens who expressed horror, grief, and shame for the millions murdered by Nazis (and Vichy collaborators) yet who remained deaf and blind to Algerians suffering their own state’s exceptional yet routine violence.

The letter repeats ‘Arabe’ not less than twenty times before shifting to repetition of a different epithet. Fanon’s text concludes:

"Millions de fellahs exploités, trompés, volés. 
Fellahs agrippés à quatre heures du matin, abandonnés à huit heures du soir.
Du soleil à la lune.
Fellahs gorgés d’eau, gorgés de feuilles, gorgés de vieille galette qui doit faire tout le mois.
Fellah immobile et tes bras bougent et ton dos courbé mais ta vie arrêtée…"

"Fellah sans terre.
Fellah sans raison …
Fellah essoré."
Sans rêve.

Travaille fellah. Dans ton sang l’éreintement prosterné de toute une vie.
Six mille francs par mois.
Sur ton visage le désespoir.
Dans ton ventre la résignation…
Qu’importe fellah si ce pays est beau.

Travaille fellah. Dans ton sang l’éreintement prosterné de toute une vie.
Six mille francs par mois.
Sur ton visage le désespoir.
Dans ton ventre la résignation…
Qu’importe fellah si ce pays est beau.
(58)

‘Fellah’ is an Arabic noun that was picked up by French to describe the rural Algerian poor (farmer, peasant); the term was used—as was ‘fellaq’ (robber, bandit, thief), or the abbreviation ‘fell’ that conflates both terms—by French soldiers to designate their enemies during the French counterrevolutionary repression. The letter’s turn from ‘Arabe’ to ‘fellah’ (via ‘indigène’) articulates the epistemological shrouding that renders ‘Arabe’ imperceptible with the systematic subalternization and military and police force that produced so many ‘fellahin’ corpses for mass graves—bodies that were never ritually shrouded or properly buried, only concealed by another ‘linceul de silence’ that Fanon’s brutal voice and rhetorical gestures aim to rend.

One epithet appears nowhere in Fanon’s lexicon, yet it haunts this text. The ‘indigène musulman’ was a juridical category instituted and experimented with by the French in Algeria since the mid-19th century. Though the term was officially dispensed after WWII, it named the defining spatial, political, and juridical divide of Algérie française. In other words, Fanon’s ‘death shroud’ has a long institutional and material history. In 1848, the constitution of the French Second Republic declared Algeria France and distinguished ‘les citoyens français’ from ‘les sujets français.’ French-born settlers of Algeria and their
children—*pied noirs*, like the one addressed by Fanon’s letter—were citizens deserving civil rights and state protection; Algeria’s other inhabitants were declared ‘français’ but not ‘citoyen’. In 1865, the first article of the infamous *code de l’indigénat* defined the status of a ‘sujet français’ as follows:

*Article 1:* L’indigène musulman est français; néanmoins il continuera à être régi par la loi musulmane. Il peut être admis à servir dans les armées de terre et de mer. Il peut être appelé à des fonctions et emplois civils en Algérie. Il peut, sur sa demande, être admis à jouir des droits de citoyen français; dans ce cas, il est régi par les lois civiles et politiques de la France.

In this declaration, the indigène subject (‘musulman’ or ‘israelite’) appears at once partially absent yet potentially present to the French imperial nation-state. The definition names certain bodies as potential workers and soldiers (useful); declares them subject to a uniquely repressive penal code and incarceration system (dangerous; disposable); and empties them of prior and future content, without history but with potential futures as French citizens on the condition that they renounce certain ‘musulman’ commitments and embrace the promises of the Republic. ‘Musulman’ is not a synonym for ‘muslim’ here, nor is it a self-evident cultural or ethnic status; the French state’s definition of ‘musulman’ had little to do with religious practice and everything to do with designating a category of non-citizens at this precarious legal threshold. Although ‘Lamine Gueye’ law of May 1946 recognized all French ‘nationals’ as ‘citoyen’ and dispensed with both the *code de l’indigénat* and the juridical-administrative category ‘indigène-musulman,’ this ambiguous status persisted in 1956 under other names.

Fanon’s ‘Lettre à un français’ registers this afterlife of the ‘indigène-musulman’ as non-life. It transforms census count logic into death register, mourning rite, plaint, and prayer: “Je t’offre ce dossier afin que nul ne meure/ ni les morts d’hier ni les ressuscités d’aujourd’hui” (57).
Like most of Fanon’s writing, “Le « syndrome nord africain»” is a text of elusive genre. As its title suggests, the essay assumes the narrative conventions of a scientific medical paper: it states an objective, advances three theses, offers a diagnosis and concludes with something like a treatment recommendation. “Le « syndrome nord africain»” was published in a February 1952 issue of L’Esprit devoted to discussing the North African proletariat in France. In it, a young Dr. Fanon confronts an implied audience of French medical colleagues with pointed questions about the Algerian workers hidden in plain sight in the city (and behind a veil of racist epithets) around them: “Quelles sont-elles, en vérité, ces créatures, qui se dissimulent, qui sont dissimulés par la vérité sociale sous les attributs de bicot, bounioule, arabe, raton, sidi, mon z’ami?” (14).

Fanon depicts a routine clinical scene: the Algerian worker comes complaining to the French doctor about mysterious, pervasive pain. The patient gestures and speaks an incomprehensible Algerian Arabic (darija): “il a mal dans le ventre, dans la tête, dans le dos, il a mal partout. Il souffre atrocement, son visage est éloquent, c’est une souffrance qui en impose” (12). The doctor touches the patient, percusses, palpitates, interrogates. He sees nothing wrong (“ne voit rien” [16]). Because the cardinal assumption of professional medical training is that “tout symptome suppose une lésion,” this French doctor who ‘sees nothing’ quite reasonably deduces that this must be a phantom pain, invented by the ‘Arabe’: “C’est une pseudo-pathologie. L’Arabe est un pseudo-malade. Tout Arabe est un malade imaginaire” (19).

The guillemets (« ») in the essay’s title signal Fanon’s skepticism concerning the standard diagnosis of a so-called ‘North African Syndrome’, and as the text mimics
professional narrative conventions and diagnostic norms Fanon’s arch skepticism gives way to withering satire. It helps to know that Fanon had defended his own medical thesis not three months before publishing this essay, in November 1951. That unpublished 75-page thesis—grimly titled “Mental disturbances, changes in character, psychic disturbances and intellectual deficiency in spinal-cerebral degeneracy: A case of Friedrich’s disease with delusions of possession”—was written hastily and submitted begrudgingly by Fanon only after he had presented the manuscript of Peau noire, masques blancs as his thesis. \(^{41}\) Peau noire was “angrily rejected” by Fanon’s advisor Dechaume “on the predictable grounds that it defied all known academic and scientific conventions,” given that “a medical thesis is not the place for such an experimental exploration of the author’s subjectivity or for such lengthy quotations from Aimé Césaire” (Macey 151). That is, Fanon published “Le « syndrome nord africain»” just months after defending a thesis he did not want to write; his first publication had been “L’expérience vécu du noir,” a section of Peau noire published in L’Esprit in May 1951, just months prior. The full text of the rejected thesis would be published as a book by Seuils later in 1952. That is, “Le « syndrome nord africain»” flagrantly parodies and subverts the narrative formula that Fanon had just been compelled to respect, described by his mentor Tosquelles: “One chapter per illness. The well known sequence: diagnosis, prognosis, treatment” (Tosquelles in Macey 151).

In a chapter of Peau noire titled ‘Le nègre et la psychopathologie,’ Fanon uses a rare diagnostic term that helps to make sense of the diagnosis that develops in ‘Le « syndrome nord africain».’ The word appears in his description of a white woman’s pathological phobia of black men near the conclusion of the psychopathology chapter:

Dans son lit, le tam-tam aux oreilles, elle voyait effectivement des nègres. Elle se réfugiait sous les draps en tremblant. Puis des cercles de plus en plus petits apparaissaient et scotomiser les nègres. On retrouve donc les cercles comme mécanismes de défense contre les hallucinoses. Aujourd’hui, les cercles apparaissent
sans le Noir—le mécanisme de défense s’impose en ignorant son déterminisme. (*Peau noire* 168, emphasis added)

*Scotoma*, from the Latin, is both a medical and psychiatric term that designates obscuration of part of the field of vision due a lesion of the retina. According to David Macey, the term entered psychoanalytic use when René Laforgue used it “to describe a process of psychic depreciation by means of which the individual attempts to deny everything which conflicts with his ego” (150). Freud rejected it (to use Verwerfung instead); Lacan took it up in a 1938 article “to describe the mechanism that triggers a psychosis,” and later replaced it with ‘forclusion’ (150). Fanon had read Lacan—his dissertation contains his first references to Lacan’s texts—and it also appears that he picked up this suggestive diagnostic term for his own critical repurposing.

Although Fanon does not cite the word ‘scotoma’ in this essay, his corrective re-diagnosis of a supposedly ‘North African’ syndrome as French optical problem suggests that the term was in his lexicon and on his mind. A person with a retinal scotoma *looks* but—not unlike the French doctor faced with a suffering Algerian patient—cannot *see* the object in the center of the visual field. Fanon’s formulation of his medical report’s guiding objective also recalls his description of the white woman’s psychopathology: “Tous ces hommes qui nous font peur… Quels sont-ils?”—here the pronoun flickers as if to suggest equivocation between French citizen and subject, human (hommes) and not-quite (créatures)—“Quelles sont-elles, ces créatures affamées d’humanité qui s’arc-boutent aux frontières impalpables (mais je le sais s’expérience terriblement nettes) de la reconnaissance intégrale?” (14).

Countering the standard diagnosis, Fanon sees that the ‘North African syndrome’ is a set of symptoms that do indeed presuppose a lesion, but that this originary lesion is distinctively French rather than ‘North African.’

Fanon’s mode of address veers from prim ‘vous’ and collegial ‘nous’ to an
accusatory ‘tu’ by the essay’s conclusion. He had already noticed and struggled with the French medical norm of addressing Algerian patients like children, using informal pronouns and pidgin French (see Macey 155). The abrupt pronoun shift in this text communicates not just intimacy and aggression but a deliberate reversal of a patronizing mode of address by which this young doctor turns his address to the real ‘malade’ on the scene:

Comment, comment, cet homme que tu choseifies en l’appelant systématiquement Mohammed, que tu reconstruis, ou plutôt que tu dissous, à partir d’une idée, une idée que tu sais dégueulasse (tu sais bien, tu lui enlèves quelque chose, ce quelque chose pour lequel il n’y a pas bien longtemps tu étais prêt à tout quitter, même la vie), eh bien! cet homme-ci, tu n’as pas l’impression de le vider de sa substance?

(23)

Fanon’s parenthetical aside pinpoints the ironic fact—call it incommensurability or blindspot—that the very ‘humanity’ that so many French citizens had been willing to die to protect from Nazi destruction is precisely what the idea and the practices of La plus grande France strip from those whom the same citizens systematically call ‘Mohammed.’ In Fanon’s professional re-evaluation, this mysterious affliction is no defect of the Algerian imagination or Arab character but a distinctively French pathology: in particular, it is an optical disorder, a failure to properly recognize the colonized as a subject rather than mere object of sight (the Hegel-Sartre-Lacan overtones are rich here). By the essay’s conclusion it becomes clear that Fanon regards this not as the private failure of a few racist French doctors but rather a mode of perception institutionalized by the law’s equivocation as a collective French blindness that renders living colonized subjects spectral.

The text moves to the crux of its evaluation by citing the deferred promises of the La plus grande France: “Droits, Devoirs, Citoyenneté, Egalité, que de belles choses!” (22). It underscores the precarious threshold status of subjects to whom these promises do not apply—“Le Nord Africaine au seuil de la Nation français—qui est, nous dit-on, la sienne—vit dans le domaine politique sur le plan cirique un imbroglio que personne ne veut voir en
face” (22). It then poses a series of open questions that invite the French reader to assume responsibility for the ghostly status of Algerians produced by this inhospitable exclusion:

Comment, des hommes vont et viennent le long d'un couloir que tu as construit pour eux, où tu n'as ménagé aucun banc où ils puissent se reposer, où tu as cristallisé un tas d'épouvantails que leur giflent rageusement le visage, où ils se blessent la face, la poitrine, le cœur.

Où ils ne trouvent pas de place
où tu ne leur fais pas de place
où il n'y a absolument pas place pour eux
et tu oses me dire que cela ne t'intéresse pas! Que ce n’est pas ta faute! (23)

Although he nowhere cites the law, Fanon indicts the vanishing force of the founding definition by which Algérie française promised to the ‘indigène-musulman’ a place in its modern Republic ‘où il n'y a absolument pas place pour eux’ (23). In Fanon’s evaluation, the Algerian worker’s expression of pain does not register not because this patient cannot speak or is actually invisible or incoherent, but because the French doctor cannot hear or see properly, as his senses are well-trained by an imperial nation-state whose scotoma he inherits and whose violence he therefore is conscribed to reproduce. In place of the conventional patient ‘biography,’ Fanon therefore substitutes a ‘necrography’ of the Algerian worker physically present in yet politically absent from the public spaces of Lyon:

Une mort dans le tram,
une mort à la consultation,
une mort avec les prostituées,
une mort au chantier,
une mort au cinéma,
une mort multiple dans les journaux,
une mort dans la crainte de tous les honnêtes gens de sortir après minuit,
une mort,
oui une MORT’ (22).

Much like the Lettre à a un français, Fanon’s diagnosis concludes with an entreaty that sounds much like a prayer on behalf of these living dead. The texts ends with questions and in the
intimate second person address, a distinctive echo of the concluding lines of *Peau noire masques blancs*:

> Si tu n’exiges pas l’homme, si tu ne sacrifies pas l’homme que est en toi pour que l’homme qui est sur cette terre soit plus qu’un corps, plus qu’un Mohammed, par quel tour de passe-passe faudra-t-il que j’acquire la certitude que, toi aussi, tu est digne de mon amour? (Fanon 25)

**7 | Conclusion: Presently Absent Witnesses**

Recall that Agamben’s paradox of the ‘absent’ witness, as he formulated it in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, relied on his critical appropriation of the ambiguous figure of the ‘muselman.’ Agamben reserves this term for those irretrievable witnesses who, drowned by the engineered horror of the Nazi camps, would never testify at legal trials such as the one held at the Jerusalem House of Justice in 1961. This particular paradox of political and historiographic invisibility must be thought in conjunction with the politically calculated and legally enforced form of absence-in-plain-sight diagnosed by Fanon during the same years—just as the Algerian war for national liberation and the French counterrevolution escalated to hallucinatory levels of violence, just as the French police murdered Algerian demonstrators who claimed their right to visibility on the streets of the colonial capital in October 1961.

Prompted by Fanon’s open questions, my project calls for critical attunement to histories and texts that still do not often appear in scholarship on the ethics of memory and testimony, in postcolonial French debates on national identity, or in transnational discourses on state violence and terror—not because these texts and subjects do not exist but, perhaps, because they do not tend to register as relevant or legible.

Critical reflection on Nazi atrocities and the great post-Holocaust trials generated human rights discourse and redefined testimony’s relation to theories of justice and history; it also produced the scholarship on testimony, trauma, and memory that emerged in US
literary departments during the 1990s. In her “Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics” (2007), Susannah Radstone situates the rise and institutionalization of ‘trauma studies’ in its cultural moment: “Trauma theory,” she writes, “arguably constitutes one attempt by history to think itself ‘through’ a post-Auschwitz world” (21). The canonical texts of trauma theory, published by literary scholars and practicing clinicians in the U.S. during the 1990s and early 2000s, reflect directly on Nazi violence during World War II with a vital cross-fertilization by US psychoanalytic theory and clinical practice. Cathy Caruth’s Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (1996) was the first to use the term ‘trauma theory,’ and was indebted to Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s earlier Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History (1992). Other work in this moment includes Geoffrey Hartman’s studies of Holocaust survivor testimony video recordings, ‘On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Study’ (1995) and The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust (2001); Dominick LaCapra’s Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma (1996) and Writing History, Writing Trauma (2001); Marianne Hirsch’s Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory (1997); Allan Young’s ethnography of PTSD in Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (1995); and Shoshana Felman’s The Juridical Unconscious: Traims and Traumas of the Twentieth Century (2002). Radstone points out that this work coincided, not incidentally, with the codification of PTSD in the 3rd (1985) and 4th editions (1994) of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders and that it was received in a political and cultural climate dramatically punctuated by the event of September 11, 2001.

Not unlike Fanon and Agamben, these scholars were also preoccupied by the paradox posed by absent witnesses. Dori Laub formulates the aetiology of trauma as “an event without a witness” (TC 75-92), while Cathy Caruth emphasizes the unclaimed, belated
quality of traumatic events; these insights helped to cultivate reading practices that aimed “to
demonstrate the ways in which texts may be engaged in belated remembrance of trauma”
(Radstone 22) and theories of subjectivity characterized by absence and forgetting. Radstone
summarizes:

The subject of trauma theory is characterized by that which is does not
know/remember (UC 4-7; TEM 1-5). This is not a subject caught up in desire, but a
subject constituted by forgetting. The inner world of the traumatized subject is
characterized not by repression of unacknowledgeable fantasies but by dissociated
memories—traceless traces. Though the subject of trauma theory cannot be restored
to coherence through acts of remembrance, a belated acknowledgement of that which
has been forgotten is a possibility (TEM, 4). The traumatized subject can remember
its having forgotten, if you like—can acknowledge the gaps and absences. Most
importantly, this act of ‘recovery’ takes place in relation to a witness. Testimony, as the
title of Felman and Laub’s seminal text confirms and Caruth demonstrates (see
specially UC, 108), is a term foregrounded in trauma theory. It refers to a relation of
witnessing between the subject of trauma and the listener. According to Felman and
Laub, testimony (to trauma) demands a witness and it is only within the context of
witnessing that testimony to trauma is possible. In this relation, some testimony can
be made to trauma’s ‘traceless traces.’ (20)

As its critics have pointed out, trauma theory’s inclusions and exclusions are telling.
What counts as a traumatized subject? What texts are selected to be read as trauma texts?
What is the position of the scholar as witness? “Why is it,” asks Radstone pointedly, “that
there has been so little attention within trauma theory to the recent suffering of those in
Rwanda in comparison to the attention that has been focused on events in the US on 9/11?”
(24). This question could be posed in many other ways, as it has been posed by critics: Why
are Vietnam and Iraqi war veterans subjects of PTSD studies but not the citizens of Vietnam
and Iraq? Why does the Shoah remain the defining site for trauma theory rather than the
British slave ship or the Haitian sugar plantation? Why does Felman argue for reading
Camus’s La peste as Holocaust trauma allegory without mentioning that this novel is literally
set and written in colonized Algeria? Does Rothberg’s selection of primary texts in
Multidirectional Memory, an important effort to bridge postcolonial and holocaust studies, not
believe a particular directionality to ‘multidirectional’ remembering? It is this critical habit of absenting that motivates my project, as I aim to reflect critically on not only the consequences of exclusion reflected by the selection of texts and victims but also on the (however compassionate) colonization of the texts and stories of others, to cultivate practices of reading testimony and theorizing trauma that recognize colonizing violence in past and present forms.42

The time during which US literary scholars theorized trauma and testimony is the moment that anglophone postcolonial critics became especially interested in French colonial violence and that histories of the Algerian war began to enter public and academic discourse in France—including largely through figures of repression, disavowal, and forgetting. Homi Bhabha’s Lacanian reading of Fanon in his The Location of Culture (1994) injected postcolonial studies with a new take on Fanon. Benjamin Stora’s seminal La gangrène et l’oubli (1991) and Kristin Ross’s Fast Cars Clean Bodies (1996) argued that disavowal of the Algerian war constitutively haunts contemporary French politics and culture. Robert J.C. Young’s White Mythologies (1990) and Ross’s May ’68 and its Afterlives (2002) relocate the historical roots of poststructuralism not in the crisis associated with the student revolts of May 1968, but in the (forgotten) rupture produced by the Algerian struggle against colonial domination ten years prior. More recent work by Ranjana Khanna (2008), Paige Arthur (2010), Hannah Feldman (2014), and Debarati Sanyal (2015) extends these insights in new and compelling directions.

Yet the risk remains: if the Algerian war for independence continues to be implicitly framed as traumatic for the French subject—a subject constituted by forgetting, characterized by dissociated memories and traceless traces (see, for example, Michael Haneke’s 2005 film Caché and related scholarship)—or if the anticolonial war is primarily characterized as a defining rupture in French collective identity and national history, then the aesthetic and
cultural work of Algerians for other audiences and in languages other than French tend to fall out of the picture, as do much more recent histories and current wars. If those texts and times brought into the center of study, how must the picture and the reading practices change?

1 Gil Anidjar discusses Ka-Tzetnik’s novel in *The Jew, The Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). The visual image on the title page of this essay is from Also Carpi, described by Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz* as the only extant images the ‘muselman’. Carpi’s drawings are in private collections, and can be viewed online:

2 This is in the context of a discussion of the ‘esprit réciproque’ connecting colonisé and colon; the Hegelian undertones are obvious, and Fanon also cites Sartre’s *Critique de la raison dialectique* and Césaire’s play *Les armes miraculeuses*; his discussion of ‘force’ also connects this passage to Walter Benjamin’s *Zur Kritik de Gewalt* and George Sorel’s *Réflexions sur la violence*, texts that Fanon might have known, as well as Derrida’s *Force of law*, which he couldn’t have, but Derrida’s later insights shed light on Fanon’s point that “le colonisé ne perd-il pas son temps en lamentations et ne cherche-t-il presque jamais à ce qu’on lui rende justice dans le cadre colonial” (82).

3 In the paragraphs just preceding, Fanon offers fuller description of arithmetic reasoning and visible performance of colonial force of law: “Le régime colonial tire sa légitimité de la force et à aucun moment n’essaie de ruser avec cette nature de choses. Chaque statue, celle de Faidherbe ou de Lyautey, de Bugeaud ou du sergent Blandan, tous ces conquistadors juchés sur le sol colonial n’arrêtent pas de signifier une seule et même chose : « Nous sommes ici par la force des baïonnettes… » On complète aisément. Pendant la phase insurrectionnelle, chaque colon raisonne à partir d’une arithmétique précise. Cette logique n’étonne pas les autres colons mais il est important de dire qu’elle n’étonne pas non plus les colonisés… Et quand, préconisant des moyens précis, le colon demande à chaque représentant de la minorité qui opprime de descendre 30 ou 100 ou 200 indigènes, il s’aperçoit que personne n’est indigné et qu’à l’extrême tout le problème est de savoir si on peut faire ça d’un seul coup ou par étapes’ (81-2).


8 “What is a Camp?”, p. 1.

9 This question has preoccupied others; see in particular Anidjar’s The Jew, The Arab and Fethi Benslama’s "La représentation et l'impossible" in Jean- Luc Nancy (dir.), L’Art et la Mémoire des camps (Paris: Seuil, 2001).

10 For an illustration of this appeal, see Alison Ross, The Agamben Effect (South Atlantic Quarterly Special Issue [Duke University Press], Vol. 107, No. 1, Winter 2008).


12 Sylvie Thénault describes the penal system under French colonial law in Violence Ordinaire dans l’Algérie Coloniale: camps, internements, assignations à résidence (Constantine: Saïd Hannachi, Editions Média-Plus, 2012), an excellent study of the relationship of the code de l’indigénat to the expanding network of prisons, detention centers, and concentration camps that were strategically central to the French conquest and administration of Algeria from the colony’s foundation to its independence; this is the basis of her objection to Agamben’s notion of ‘exception.’ “Avec l’indigénat,” writes Thénault, “la violence colonial se trouvait inscrite dans le droit. Légitimée, elle était banalisée” (10).

13 For studies of French colonial law in Algérie française, see: Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, De L’indigénat: Anatomie d’un monstre juridique, Le droit colonial en Algérie et dans l’Empire français (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 2010); Patrick Weil, How to Be French: Nationality in the Making since 1789 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) and "Le statut des musulmans en Algérie coloniale: une nationalité française dénaturée” (European University Institute working paper, 2003); Sidi Mohammad Barkat Le corps d’exception : les artifices du pouvoir colonial et la destruction de la vie (Paris: Amsterdam, 2005); Sylvie Thénault, Violence Ordinaire and Une Drôle de Justice : Les magistrats dans la guerre d’Algérie (Paris: La Découverte, 2001). In “Savage wars? Codes of Violence in Algeria, 1830s-1990s,” James McDougall aptly describes the indigénat as a legalized state of exception: “Overtly a wartime law, a set of emergency regulations for the suppression of revolt but maintained thereafter in what was notionally a time of peace, the indigénat both symbolized and, in the exactions it entailed, made manifest that aspect of the colonial state which constituted an apparatus of permanent, routinized low-intensity
warfare” *(Third World Quarterly, vol. 26, no. 1, 2005, p. 122).*

In his studies of the history of French citizenship (see n10), Weil points out that the term ‘muselman’ was reinvented by the French not as a religious or civil description but rather as an ‘ethnico-political’ category informed by homogenizing notions of ethnicity defined by characteristics quite distinct from religious practice—characteristics perceived and codified by the French.

Again, the critiques by Fethi Benslama (‘La répresentation et l’impossible,” 2001) and Gil Anidjar (*The Jew, The Arab: A history of the enemy*, 2003) are the notable exceptions.


Hannah Feldman’s *From a Nation Torn* (2014) advances a compelling critique the term ‘postwar’ as a neutral description of the period after 1945.


The film described by Agamben is available online from the British Pathé, which neither identifies this as Bergen Belsen nor specifies the year. The footage from 0:43 forward is almost certainly the section to which Agamben refers: [http://www.britishpathe.com/video/concentration-camp-footage](http://www.britishpathe.com/video/concentration-camp-footage).

25 Levi 62 (Crane Books edition); p. 88 in the Simon and Schuster. There is no such insertion in Levi’s Italian; it appears to be an editorial intervention to help readers of the English translation who, unlike Italian or French readers, would find this word unfamiliar.


27 Fethi Benslama takes this transformation of the epithet into a proper name as the starting point for his rigorous critique of Agamben (‘La représentation et l’impossible,’ 2001). Sylvie Thénault, the historian of French imperialism, observes that this typographic assimilation naturalizes the violence of colonial taxonomy and insists that “« indigènes » et « musulmans » ne peuvent être écrits sans guillemets” (Thénault 16). Persuaded by this reasoning, I follow the practice of Benslama and Thénault.

28 Oxford English Dictionary entry “Mussulman.”

29 Levi adds to this semantic cluster a term not mentioned by Agamben: “In the Ravensbrück Lager (the only one exclusively for women), the same concept was expressed, so I’m told by Lydia Rolfi, by the two specular substantives *Schmutzstück* and *Schmuckstück*, respectively, ‘garbage’ and ‘jewel,’ almost homophonous, one the parody of the other” (*DS*, 99).


31 The 1939 famine was the direct result of colonial policies documented and denounced by Camus in reports with titles like “Famine in Algeria,” later compiled in his *Chroniques Algériennes, 1939-1958* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958).

32 Achille Mbembe’s ‘Necropolitics’ is an important correction of this marginalization; notably, Mbembe begins his critique of Agamben by turning to the Algerian scene and to Fanon’s texts in particular.

33 For a detailed study of the history of this photograph and its strategic use as a political icon, see Vincent Lemire and Yann Potin, “« ICI ON NOIE LES ALGERIENS » : Fabriques documentaires, avatars politiques, et mémoires partagées d’une icône militante (1961-2001) ” in *Génèses* 49, December 2002, pp. 140-162. With thanks to Hannah Feldman for alerting me to this article.

34 This passage from Ka-Tzetnik’s novel is cited as opening epigraph to my essay. Video of his testimony (and fainting) is available online; see in particular 4:45-5:30 for reference to the ‘Muselman’: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0T9tZiKY14](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0T9tZiKY14).


Sylvie Thénault’s Violence Ordinaire illustrates argues this with historiographic detail.


Frantz Fanon, ‘De la violence,’ in Les damnés de la terre (Paris: Éditions La Découverte/Poche, 2002), 82. First published by François Maspero, 1961, 1968. Translation mine. Fanon illustrates his observation by describing a ‘banal’ calculation whereby no number of Algerian lives lost add up to a single French death before the law: “Bientôt sept ans de crimes en Algérie et pas un Français qui ait été traduit devant une cour de justice pour le meurtre d’un Algérien” (89).

David Macey discusses the fact that Fanon had intended to submit Peau noire masques blancs as thesis, and Fanon suggests as much on p. 39 of that text: “Quand nous avons commencé cet ouvrage, parvenu au terme de nos études médicales, nous nous proposion de le soutenir en tant que thèse. Et puis la dialectique exigea de nous des prises de positions redoublées.”

Here see Radstone’s reading of Steedman: “If these autobiographical acts construct their subjects through a colonization of the stories of others, which also become the means by which the sensitivity of the narrating and reading subject is produced, perhaps contemporary trauma criticism’s exclusions reveal that there are some ‘others’ who are not even worthy of such colonization…for to be included within trauma criticism’s reach may be to become subject to its drive to construct an empathetic listening subject and a subjectivity modelled on those narratives to which it attends. Yet those whose excessive otherness excludes them from trauma criticism’s incorporative drives also find themselves beyond trauma criticism’s reach” (Radstone 25).
CHAPTER TWO

TESTIMONY OUTSIDE THE LAW:
A Poetics of Justice for Djamila Boupacha

Algiers/Paris 1960-1962

“Je ne sais pas, mais je dis que celui qui cherchera dans mes yeux autre chose qu’une interrogation perpétuelle devra perdre la vue . . .”

—Frantz Fanon, Peau noire masques blancs, 23

1 | One Girl’s Blood

Djamila Boupacha is not the author of the collection of testimonies and documents that bears her name (Djamila Boupacha, Gallimard 1962). The twenty-two-year-old Algerian anticolonial militant and convicted terrorist was in French prison—first at Barberousse in Algiers, then at Fresnes near Versailles—when the ‘Comité Pour Djamila Boupacha,’ led by the FLN defense lawyer Gisèle Halimi and Simone de Beauvoir, organized to lobby on her behalf beginning in mid-1960. Boupacha had been sentenced to execution after her arrest and confession to planting a bomb in an Algiers café in 1959, but she then recanted her statement and accused the French police officers and soldiers who arrested her of forcing
her to sign a false testimony after torturing her for weeks in cells at El Biar and Hussein Dey detention centers in Algiers.

Boupacha’s was among the last of several highly publicized torture cases that helped to make visible the illegal and systematic violence being carried out by the French state to preserve Algérie française during the late years of that long war, but between them Halimi and Beauvoir made it—briefly—among the most famous. Urged by the French Procureur General of Algiers to keep Boupacha’s case out of the media1 after she had studied the dossier and spoken with the prisoner at Barberousse, Halimi returned from Algiers to Paris and wrote directly to General Charles de Gaulle, to André Malraux (Prix Goncourt-winning novelist, recently named Minister of Culture, and as she notes pointedly, “l’homme responsable, dans le Gouvernement, de cette affirmation « On ne torture plus en Algérie »” [60-1]), to Edmond Michelet (Dachau survivor, Resistance hero, Minister of Justice, and author of epigraph and title of the just-published collection of torture testimonies La gangrène), and to Pierre Messmer (Minister of the Army), but she got tepid response from these state officials2; she persuaded Nobel laureate François Mauriac to publish a piece in l’Express about Boupacha’s case but she found its tone reticent and ethically ambiguous (61); she spoke with Daniel Mayer, president of the Ligue des Droits de l’Homme, who wept with shame upon hearing the graphic details of Boupacha’s torture (62); and then she telephoned Simone de Beauvoir (60-62).

By 1960—when Halimi contacted Beauvoir—the French practice of torture in Algeria was an open secret, despite the state’s campaign of disavowal. In her Torture and the Twilight of Empire (2008), Marnia Lazreg argues that while the counterrevolutionary techniques honed by the French in Algeria entailed much more than the practice of torture, torture was at the core of the French state’s ‘terror matrix,’ expressing not an exception to
but the rule of colonizing force—which was also Sartre’s argument in ‘Colonialisme est un système’ (1956) and ‘Vous êtes formidables’ (1957), and a position that Beauvoir appears to have shared with Sartre.3 In her important study of decolonization’s impact on twentieth-century French culture and politics, Kristin Ross (1995) splices citations from texts by Roger Trinquier, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Bernard Droz and Evelyne Lever, Henri Alleg, Henri Marron, and Jean-Pierre Vittori to produce this depiction of the systematic torture taking place from the remote Kabyle to the Algiers Casbah to the heart of Ile-de-France, especially after 1957:

‘What had been at the outset an improvisation rapidly became a veritable institution with its appropriate structures, its executives [cadres], its executors [executants], its panoply of accessories and its rules for functioning.’ The institution was complete with schools [écoles de formation de cadres] for the training of experts or ‘specialists,’ instruction in these schools focused on producing a torture that was ‘clean,’ which is to say exercised without sadism and without leaving visible traces. Techniques and equipment were standardized: ‘Torture became in 1957 a daily and almost banal practice. It functioned everywhere...As for techniques, these hardly varied...suspending the body...and above all the bathtub and electricity.’ ‘Everywhere in Algeria, no one denies it, veritable laboratories of torture have been installed with electric bathtubs and everything that’s necessary.’ (Ross 118-119)

That is, while torture was neither an exceptional nor a secret practice during that war, it was technically illegal; its widespread institutionalization relied on a calculated and systematic production of its invisibility. In her From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France 1945-1962 (2014), Hannah Feldman highlights the long-disavowed counter-revolutionary war in Algeria as “a key moment in the essential turn to extrajuridical means to implement and develop political invisibility” (5). The range of euphemisms for what the war’s strategists insisted was a modern, clean, and humane ‘action de police’ or ‘pacification’4 outline the task of resignification taken up by antiwar and anticolonial activists of the time, and highlight the epistemological stakes of the political project that Beauvoir would take on.
with Halimi in Boupacha’s name: “Et là est bien la question,” notes historian Benjamin Stora, “la guerre d’Algérie a-t-elle eu lieu?” (38).5

Under these conditions of obfuscation and disavowal, French antiwar and anticolonial activists—which Beauvoir became when she decided to advocate publicly for Djamila Boupacha—contested their state’s narrative authority by instrumentalizing testimony (témoignage, récit) as the literary form par excellence for producing verifiable evidence of French state violence. Beauvoir, like many metropolitan French readers during the war’s final intense years, had learned about the stunning violence being carried out by French forces in Algeria by reading the many testimonial and documentary texts—memoirs, reports, pamphlets, court proceedings, detailed eye-witness accounts—that began to be published and circulated clandestinely in Paris by leftist presses such as Maspero, Minuit, and Gallimard as soon as the first French military conscripts returned from service in Algeria.

Beauvoir’s memoir La force des choses is riddled with reference to this contestatory and swiftly censored6 archive: “Des rappelés parlèrent,” Beauvoir writes, “des renseignements affluèrent… conversations, lettres addressés à moi, à des amis, reportages étrangers, rapports plus ou moins secrets que des petits groups diffusaient” (386). Beauvoir cites among others Pierre Henri Simon’s polemic Contre la torture (Seuil 1957), the brochure of conscript testimonies Des rappelés témoignent (Comité de résistance spirituelle, 1957), Jacques Vergès’ and George Arnaud’s defense Pour Djamila Bouhired (Minuit 1957), Henri Alleg’s account of his own arrest and torture and of Maurice Audin’s disappearance La Question (Minuit 1958), reports concerning the torture and disappearance of Ali Boumendjel and Larbi ben M’hidi, chronicles of Algerians disappeared and tortured by French police and military such as Les disparus: le cahier vert (La Cité-éditeur 1958) and La gangrène (Minuit 1959), and a Croix-Rouge report (1959) documenting conditions in the civilian ‘camps de regroupement,’ of which she
wrote with acute anguish: “Au début du printemps 59 nous fut révélé un visage peu connu de cette guerre exécratrice: les camps” (479). In entries written between 1960 and 1963, Beauvoir tracks her own dawning awareness of just what was being done in Algeria during these “années de guerre, massacres, et tortures” (428) as a process of emerging from obscurity and blindness to see herself through Algerian eyes: “La vérité da la pacification,” she writes in 1960, “acheva de se dévoiler” (386); “je me voyais avec les yeux des femmes vingt fois violées, des hommes aux os brisés, des enfants fous: une française” (391).

Beauvoir’s personal account of her growing anticolonial commitment illustrates the striking degree to which metropolitan French leftists—many of whom drew explicit connections between their own state’s violence in Algeria and the Nazi atrocities that were still so vivid in their memories—struggled to raise Algerian testimony to an international stage in order to test juridical definitions of genocide in their post-Geneva, post-Nuremberg, post-Vichy time of war and to force their state to act in compliance with its own law. Beauvoir also makes explicit a juridical aporia faced by metropolitan leftists committed to resisting the colonizing state violence in which they discovered themselves complicit, an aporia that the paradox of Algerian testimony like Boupacha’s was positioned to expose. Here Beauvoir writes that to act in keeping with a recognition of ‘musulman’ and French life as equal, one might be ethically compelled to act outside the law:

La vie des musulmans ne comptait pas moins à mes yeux que celles de mes compatriotes: l’énorme disproportion entre les pertes français et le nombre des adversaires massacrés rendait écoeurant le chantage au sang français. La gauche ayant échec… à mener dans la légalité un combat efficace, si on voulait rester fidèle à ses convictions anticolonialistes et briser toute complicité avec cette guerre, il ne restait d’autre issue que l’action clandestine… (484, emphasis added)

Gisèle Halimi soon thereafter persuaded Beauvoir to join her effort to demand acquittal and justice for the condemned political prisoner Djamila Boupacha. Boupacha’s case—given that the trial for her torture would never actually take place—brought to light the limits of
French law with respect to former colonial subjects, and launched testimony beyond juridical protocols to combat and contest the political invisibility of Muslim/Algerian life in the modern French state.

On June 2, 1960, Beauvoir’s short and shocking essay ‘Pour Djamila Boupacha’ appeared in the popular French tabloid *Le Monde*, its title a pointed recall of Jacques Vergès and Georges Arnaud’s plaint on behalf of the *other* famous tortured Algerian militant named Djamila, *Pour Djamila Bouhired* (Minuit, 1957). Beauvoir’s essay stunned French sensibilities with explicit details of Boupacha’s rape by French soldiers. On June 16, the novelist Françoise Sagan published her open letter ‘*La jeune fille et la grandeur*’ in *l’Express* and invited fellow protestors to add their names. The list of signatories grew long, and included such names as Jean Amrouche, Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant, Réné Julliard, Michel Leiris, Jean-Paul Sartre, André Schwartz-Bart, Elsa Triolet, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Lacan, among many others. By the end of the month the committee had formed to lobby for justice in Boupacha’s name, led by Halimi and Beauvoir. The hundreds of support letters and telegrams that poured in from all over France, from Italy, England, the Soviet Union, Costa Rica, Egypt, Israel, expressed what Halimi describes as an international “réveil brutal” to the crimes of the French colonial state (66). By July 1960, Maurice Blanchot and Dionys Mascolo drafted their ‘Declaration of the right to insubordination in the Algerian war,’ which denounced the French government as “anarchic…violently and arbitrarily authoritarian” (Blanchot 22) and its military occupation of Algeria as “illegitimate, indefinable, unspeakable, and scandalous” (Blanchot 26), posing what struck many as an incendiary question: “Is it necessary to recall that fifteen years after the destruction of the Hitlerian order, French militarism, as a result of the exigencies of this war, has managed to reinstate torture and to make it an institution in Europe once again?” (Blanchot 16).
Beauvoir, along with Sartre, was surely the most famous French intellectual to side with the Algerian national cause and denounce the French ‘pacification’ of the revolution as a genocide—testing the uses and limits of this new juridical definition. In 1961, at the same time that Sartre composed his preface to Fanon’s *Damnés de la terre*, Beauvoir penned the preface to *Djamila Boupacha*. Beauvoir had just met Fanon in Rome (1961), and she had read and discussed his work with him and Sartre; she also had recently read the *Cahier vert* and *La gangrène*, and her references to manhunts in Oran as well as along the Seine and to bodies lynched in the Bois du Boulogne suggest that she must have known about the police massacre that had taken place in her city in October (1961), just months before *Djamila Boupacha* would be published. Beauvoir’s preface confronts her fellow French citizens in aggressive terms:

> Une Algérienne de vingt-trois ans, agent de liaison du FLN, a été séquestrée, torturée, violée avec une bouteille par des militaires français: c’est banal. Depuis 1954, nous sommes tous complices d’un génocide qui, sous le nom de répression, puis de pacification, a fait plus d’un million de victimes: hommes, femmes, vieillards, enfants, mitraillés au cours des ratissages, brûlés vifs dans leurs villages, abattus, égorgés, éventrés, martyrisés à mort; des tribus entières livrées à la faim, au froid, aux coups, aux épidémies, dans ces ‘centres de regroupement’ qui sont en fait des camps d’extermination...et où agonisent actuellement plus de cinq cent mille Algériens. Au cours de ces derniers mois, la presse, même la plus prudente, a déversé sur nous l’horreur: assassinats, lynchages, ratonnades, chasses à l’homme dans les rues d’Oran; à Paris, au fil de la Seine, pendus aux arbres du bois de Boulogne, des cadavres par dizaines; des mains brisées; des crânes éclatées; la Toussaint rouge d’Alger. Pouvons-nous être émus par le sang d’une jeune fille? (1)

Beauvoir’s strategic use of a vocabulary of genocide, disturbing and detailed imagery, and her unambiguous analogy to Nazism reflect an effort to make perceptible the colonizing violence that French readers had been trained not to see. Her concluding question—can we be moved by a young girl’s blood?—points beyond the matter of quantitative evidence and comparative body-counts. What exactly is Beauvoir asking?
Beauvoir and Halimi would make Boupacha’s blood a centerpiece of their struggle to collect sufficient evidence to get the plaint heard by a judge in a French court. They aimed both to acquit Boupacha of an unjust death sentence and to present her as a viable subject of her own testimony so that she could identify and accuse her torturers according to the rights granted her by French law, in order that the accused be charged, tried, and held accountable for their crime. Beauvoir and Halimi keenly appreciated the near-futility of hewing to legal protocols in order to force the French state to behave justly concerning Algerian injuries, but they did it anyway, caught in the double bind of an act of impossible but necessary translation.9 With Beauvoir and Boupacha as her co-authors, Halimi constructed a legible civil subject of legitimate grievance, yet the accounting that she demanded on her client’s behalf never took place. Concerning the insurmountable ‘difficulty’ acquiring the civil documents and identification photographs of the accused officers from the French Army chief in Algiers, Halimi is indignant but not surprised: “Un juge demandait des photographies. Un ministre les lui refusait: il y avait crime et la justice devait le dire et sanctionner” (213). Despite her considerable narrative and legal expertise, the torturers were never identified, and their act of spilling Boupacha’s blood proved unverifiable in the French court of law.

_Djamila Boupacha_ was thus published to short-circuit the justice system’s failure in the face of military intransigence, opening to public judgment what should have appeared before the law. Having demanded justice by juridical means, these activists found themselves pushed outside the purview of the law, as Ranjana Khanna notes: “the book [Djamila Boupacha] announced itself as the only recourse to justice given the impossibility of legal redress” (*Algeria Cuts* 80). Its authors present _Djamila Boupacha_ as testimony addressed not only to the readers in the present, but to those of the future: “De nombreux membres du
Comité avaient demandé, à plusieurs reprises, qu'un tel document fût établi qui consituerait à la fois un élément de lutte dans l’immédiat, pour faire éclater la vérité, en même temps qu’un témoignage pour l’avenir” (192). The text’s last paragraphs are composed of open questions (“ALORS? COMMENT CONFRONTER ET COMMENT CITER?” [213]) and ellipses (“…ce livre, ce dossier, ces plaies restent donc ouverts…” [214]). Djamila Boupacha concludes by citing a question from legal scholar Maurice Duverger’s *Le Monde* article of December 12, 1961: “La France est-elle devenue un pays sans justice?” (see 208). The text’s questions remain unanswered to this day: given that the French imperial nation state was founded on colonizing violence\(^{10}\), has France ever been or yet become a just nation, in particular with respect to formerly colonized subjects?

With the amnesty granted by the Evian accords that negotiated the war’s end and founded modern Algeria in mid-1962—just months after the text *Djamila Boupacha* was published—Boupacha was acquitted along with her torturers. Subsequent laws proscribed litigation against veterans of the conflict on either side, so the accused were never identified let alone charged with any crime.\(^{11}\) Although Djamila Boupacha’s non-trial reflects a collaborative activist effort to raise questions of genocide and justice on the magnitude of those at stake in the Eichmann proceedings at the Jerusalem House of Justice—and at precisely the same time (1960-1962), but under quite different conditions—this case has become a footnote to histories of the French-Algerian war. The collection of testimonies compiled on Boupacha’s behalf in 1962 is an archival relic that almost no one reads\(^{12}\), a striking contrast to the reception of Hannah Arendt’s 1963 *Eichmann in Jerusalem*—especially given the way in which Beauvoir’s opening sentence names the central problem ("Une Algérienne de vingt-trois ans, agent de liaison du FLN, a été séquestrée, torturée, violée avec une bouteille par des militaires français: c’est banal") in terms that both prefigure
Arendt’s own controversial subtitle (*a report on the banality of evil*) and echo Fanon on the banality of French body-counting. Djamila Boupacha has more or less vanished into the plural “milliers de Djamila et Ahmed” (Beauvoir 12), while a legal accounting for crimes committed against Algerians during that war have to date appeared in French court only within trials for Nazi collaboration. This rift is, as Alice Kaplan has written in an essay concerning once such trial, “both tragic and emblematic of our times.”

Critical reflection on Nazi atrocities and the great post-Holocaust trials generated human rights discourse and redefined testimony’s relation to theories of justice and history; it also produced the scholarship on testimony, trauma, and memory that emerged in US literary departments during the 1990s. This scholarship—as well as contemporary forms of political invisibility in postcolonial France—should be reconsidered in light of those many trials, such as the one imagined and demanded on behalf of Djamila Boupacha, that surely *should* have taken place, but did not. The paradoxical absence of witnesses from the Eichmann trial is a form of absence and political invisibility must be thought in conjunction with another—that of witnesses such as Djamila Boupacha, who *also* never took the stand in a trial that she and her lawyer and supporters demanded during that same year. No trial for the torture of Djamila Boupacha ever convened despite of the extraordinary visibility of her particular case. Beauvoir’s question ‘can we be moved by one girl’s blood?’ was not only a plea for justice mediated by the French juridical system, but also a call for justice to come. This question is literary: it concerns the status of the unverifiable—that toward which testimony gestures by definition—for politics.
2 | Imaginary Courtrooms

The trials demanded and staged by the authors and editors of numerous testimonial texts published to contest French violence against Algerians experiment with the politics of ‘témoignage’ taken beyond strict purview of the law. In an essay that discusses the Algerian revolution as a crucial event that transformed testimony into an instrument of political critique, Marie Goupy notes that the literary and political acts of testimony that emerged during the war “sortent donc du cadre judiciaire et surtout font sortir la justice elle-même du cadre purement judiciaire” (50), yet—as Derrida points out—the juridical scene haunts the genre of testimony by definition, in that testimony structurally implies the possibility of its presumed antithesis—“fiction, perjury, lie” (Demeure, 27). “By law,” writes Derrida, testimony must “not be a work of art or of fiction” (42). The political work of the testimonial texts circulated to counter French state violence during the campaign in Algeria certainly depended on their being read as emphatically nonfictional, and as posing truth against laws that underwrote colonial domination, as Goupy writes: “Le témoignage est alors ce qui doit permettre d’imposer une histoire, brute et vrai, face à une autre histoire, officielle et monteuse” (52). What is a politics of this non-fictional speech act when moved outside a court of law?

These texts suggest that témoignage may be a name for the juncture at which justice departs from the juridical, hence its tension with legal protocols and its affinity with fiction; it is not a speech act that produces facts to be rationally judged according to institutionalized norms, but one that articulates unverifiable truth not reducible to established evidentiary norms. Jérôme Lindon, publisher of both La Question and La gangrène, claimed truth as his motive for publishing the manuscript brought to him by Henri Alleg’s wife in 1958 despite its being illegal to do so—“Un procès aura lieu à Alger, je serai condamné…mais en même
temps, je me dis: ce livre est vrai, c’est du domaine de l’écriture, c’est une écriture qui ne ment pas. Je prends, seul, la décision de le publier” (in Stora 80, my emphasis). Likewise, the lawyer-authors of Défense politique characterized their militant truth-telling as the antidote to the state’s fictions and lawfare, and thus a kind of speech act that is an act of war: “La seule remède, le plus simple, le plus honnête, c’est de mettre en terme à l’arbitraire des fictions juridiques et des législations d’exception: c’est de renoncer à la terreur judiciaire; c’est d’appliquer enfin les lois de la guerre” (in Stora 87, my emphasis).

La gangrène

Published in June 1959 by Minuit under direction of Jérôme Lindon, La gangrène frames torture testimony for judgment by French readers by drawing a direct line from the violence done by French police officers to detained Algerians in Paris in 1959 to that committed by Nazi agents against Jews and dissidents in Vichy-era Paris just fifteen years prior. 18 La gangrène formally enacts a trial of the French state for violating its own penal codes. This juridical argument reflects an emphatic concern with verifiability so that the testimonies stand in as eye-witness evidence, while the text’s implicitly Eurocentric narrative establishes Nazism as precedent for French state torture—yet the tension between the first-person testimonies and the text’s rhetorical and paratextual framing suggests that the matter of justice may be more elusive than La gangrène’s editors propose.

La gangrène includes six statements (labeled alternately déclaration, plainte, témoignage) by Algerian men who claim to have been arrested by agents of the Direction de
la Surveillance du Territoire (DST) and tortured in rooms on Rue des Saussaies in Paris between December 2 and 12, 1958, as well as alibi testimony from an Algerian journalist who attests that he personally saw several of these men at Rue des Saussaies during the week in question. Signatures on each account establish the name (Béchir Boumaza, Mustapha Francis, Benaïssa Souami, Abdelkader Belhadj, Moussa Khebaili, Ali Hadj, Khider Seghir), age, and occupation of each victim (all are professionals or students in fields such as dentistry, pharmacy, political science, journalism). These first-person accounts are preceded by an editorial note (“Dans la légalité”) that cites articles 63 and 64 of the French penal code (“des lois très strictes furent édictées pour protéger les prisonniers de guerre” [81]) and followed a postface, signed and dated by publisher Jérôme Lindon, who describes the immediate censure and outraged denials that followed the text’s first publication in June 1959 (as if the accusation of torture, and not the act of torture, was the crime). This structure invites the reader to assess the state’s violation of its own penal code and to evaluate its guilt. The text grounds its ethical and political argument against torture by situating these testimonies within the framework of a limited post-Holocaust historiography.

La gangrène’s cover is plain white bordered by a thin black frame. Its provocative title appears in bold red type at page center, along with the title of the collection (‘Documents’) and the publisher’s insignia (a star and an M) and name (Les Éditions de Minuit), in black type at page bottom. These visual cues code Minuit’s origin as a clandestine resistance press founded to circumvent Vichy-era censorship in 1942.15 The title, La gangrène, repeats on the text’s fly pages and again in the opening epigraph that precedes the editorial preface; it also repeats as a heading at the top of each of the text’s 107 pages. The notorious address ‘Rue de Saussaies’ also repeats in the first paragraphs of each testimony, as each witness identifies it as the site of his detention and torture. These repetitions reinforce the interpretive prompt
of the text’s opening epigraph, which is the first full sentence encountered by the reader of *La gangrène*. Attributed to Edmont Michelet—whom the text identifies as Keeper of the Seal of the Ministry of Justice, although most French readers would surely have known this already—and dated March 1959, this epigraph reads: “Il s’agit là de séquelles de la vérole, du totalitarisme nazi” ‘This is the aftereffect of a virus, of Nazi totalitarianism’ (7). Michelet’s diagnosis clearly suggests that the illegal force exercised by French police be read as a sinister afterlife of Nazi totalitarianism. The viral metaphor casts these acts of torture as symptoms of a disease originating outside the French Republic, belated effects of a Vichy-era poisoning—an aberration that can presumably be amputated to heal the national body.

A French reader in 1961 would have known that Michelet was the highest-ranking officer of justice in France, and would also remember that address (11 Rue de Saussaies) as the former site of the Gestapo headquarters—a space just steps from the Élysée palace that was used for detention, interrogation, and torture of Jews and members of the resistance to be deported to the death camps. The building was taken over by the French interior ministry after 1945. By highlighting this address, the text prompts its reader to imagine the scenes of torture narrated by Boumaza, Francis, Souami, Belhadj, and Khebaili superimposed with images of torture and interrogation performed by Gestapo officers in the same rooms. This juxtaposition renders Algerians recognizable as victims of French state violence (and as subjects of testimony) through their implicit likeness to Vichy resisters, detainees, and deportees, and it renders French colonial violence perceptible and morally repugnant by filtering it through the French reader’s memory of Nazi occupation. By explicitly naming Nazism as historical precedent, *La gangrène* also shields its reader from contemplating alternate genealogies of French state violence. Torture becomes visible as criminal because it is symptom of a moral sickness alien to the Republic—its source is the unequivocally evil
Third Reich, not the familiar institutions of Algérie française or La plus grande France. This compelling emplotment positions Algerian testimony to be read as evidence of the French state’s violation of its own post-World War II legal commitments and penal codes, and does not invite reflection on the violence on which these codes and commitments rest.

The testimonies presented for scrutiny by La gangrène challenge this scripting. Consider the reasons given by Béchir Boumaza21 for publishing an account of his abuse at the hands of the police who arrested him at a friend’s apartment on Rue Montmartre on 2 December 1958:

Mon supplice n’est rien, à coté de celui de mes frères et de mes sœurs d’Algérie, brûlés vifs, mutilés, humiliés, violés, empalés, et coupés en morceaux. Mais la voix de mes frères n’atteint plus la France, et la seule raison pour laquelle je témoigne est que j’espère que ma voix, moins forte sans doute, mais plus proche, aura peut-être plus de chances de l’atteindre. (31)

(My torture is nothing next to that of my brothers and sisters in Algeria, burned alive, mutilated, humiliated, raped, impaled, cut to pieces. But my brothers’ voices no longer reach [atteint] France, and the only reason I testify is that I hope that my voice, surely less loud—but closer—will have a better chance of getting through to it [de l’atteindre].)

Boumaza complicates the narrative position assigned to him by La gangrène with an account does not quite fit the frame in which it is made to appear. His French verb suggests the desire and displacement of an act of translation: atteindre is to reach, to aim at a target, to touch, to affect. Boumaza testifies not because his experience is exceptionally traumatic but because the accounts offered by his ‘brothers and sisters in Algeria’ cannot ‘atteindre’ France: he translates because so many cannot. By the same rhetorical gesture that Boumaza addresses his French audience with a detailed account of state-sanctioned torture concealed to them, he also reminds them of the imperceptibility of most such violence. He describes his own suffering as ‘nothing’ and speaks instead of a multitude of others whose absence he highlights, offering a haunted testimony in tension with La gangrène’s implicit historiography,
which calls into question the very laws and codes on which the text’s editors stake their demand for justice.

After a detailed 18-page first-person account of his arrest, detainment, interrogation, and torture, Boumaza’s account is cut by an abrupt line break (12). His simple past tense shifts to present, and then he picks up his narrative but in a different past, and a different place. His imagery is cinematic: “Je revois défiler devant moi,” writes Boumaza, “pour la millième fois, les images d’un film dont les acteurs et les victimes furent mes amis les plus chers” (29). Like a camera panning back from Rue de Saussaies, Boumaza shifts scene to a city near the Algerian coast and a time just two days past the official conclusion of World War II: “C’était le 10 mai 1945, à Kerrata, mon village natal” (29).

There are no Nazis and no secret rooms on Rue des Saussaies in Boumaza’s flashback to Kherrata in May 1945. The ‘post-war’ scene depicted by Boumaza departs from Michelet’s reading and challenges the implicit historical argument of La gangrène. Boumaza describes a scene of torture that took place not in a concealed former Gestapo cell at the heart of Paris, but in the open air of Kerrata’s public square; the perpetrators in this May 1945 torture scene are not Nazis but French legionnaires. Boumaza names their victims: “Hanouz Arab, auxiliaire médical, à qui il était reproché d’être le secrétaire de l’Association local de culture de bienfaisance, était conduit avec ses trois enfants, dont le plus jeune avait mon âge, devant la maison du seigneur-colon de mon village” (30). What happened to Hanouz Arab and his children happened in plain sight, witnessed by everyone in town: “Là, sur la place, au milieu des encouragements de toute la population européenne, femmes et enfants compris, les Hanouz furent torturés pendant plusieurs heures par les légionnaires” (30).

Boumaza describes French soldiers enacting a public spectacle of colonizing state
power on the bodies and minds of ‘Musulman’ subjects: “Le soir, comme ils ne bougeaient plus, mais respiraient encore, les soldats obligèrent les Musulmans à défiler devant ces quatre corps, allongés les visage contre le sol” (30). The soldiers dispose of the Hanouz bodies by throwing them from a bridge into a river (resembling what the same police who tortured Boumaza in 1958 would do to protesting ‘musulmans’ in Paris in October 1961, which Boumaza could not yet have known but surely would not find difficult to imagine). He writes: “Les soldats transportèrent ensuite les Hanouz sur un pont, à trois kilomètres de là, et les précipitèrent, d’une hauteur de cinquante mètres, dans l’oued” (30). Boumaza concludes this narrative by citing the names of the dead:

Depuis, les habitants de mon village appellent ce pont « le pont des Hanouz ». Quelques mois plus tard, nous pûmes enfin, quelques amis et moi, aller recouvrir les os de M. Hanouz et de ses fils, Tayeb, Madjid et Hanafi. Je quittai mon village le lendemain, pour n’y revenir qu’en 1952. (30)

Boumaza remembers the dead not by analogy to Nazi victims, and not in the generality of the plural (“des milliers de Djamila et d’Ahmed”), but by transcribing the first names of those whose bones he says he personally gathered for burial in 1945, before leaving home: M. Hanouz Arab, Tayeb, Madjid, Hanafi.

Asked to account for what happened to him in Paris in December 1958, Boumaza transforms his own torture testimony into a lament for those whose plaints La gangrène does not transmit. This posits an alternate ‘post-war’ historiography that makes sense of the violence committed by French police at Rue de Saussaies in 1958 not by interpreting it as a sickness seeded by Nazism but rather as a recent episode in a long history of French colonial violence, one that happens to shock and repulse French citizens only because of its proximity to them. That is, Boumaza’s account suggests that torture be defined not as an exception to but a direct expression of the rule of law, its status as a criminal or repugnant determined only by which bodies suffer it, and where. His account also invites questions not
anticipated by _La gangrène_: if the fate of Hanouz Arab and his sons Tayeb, Madjid, and Hanafi cannot be cast in the shadow of Nazism, then how _else_ might these deaths be interpreted? That is, how might a reader of _La gangrène_ imagine justice for those multitudes of other ‘voices’ that would never quite reach ‘France’? How might the metropolitan activist imagine justice for plaints that cannot be heard by the state’s institutions?

With this cinematic shift of tense and scene, Boumaza complicates the demand for justice. While _La gangrène_ frames its five torture accounts as relatively straightforward if shocking evidence that would exert political pressure on French state officials to _stop_ the practice of excessive and illegal force, Boumaza’s testimony throws a wrench into the juridical argument by pressing a thornier question. What is at stake is not verifying _whether_ French police tortured Algerians in the heart of Paris in 1959, because of course they did. Rather, which acts of police violence qualify as crimes, which elude definition and therefore prosecution—and what authorizes this distinction?

_Nuremberg pour l’Algérie!_

_Nuremberg pour l’Algérie!_ (Maspero, 1961) also demanded a trial that has yet to take place, yet its demands are more radical than those posed by _La gangrène_ in that they raise the matter of justice beyond state law to an international stage to exert a different kind of political pressure on the French state. Its authors—the F.L.N. defense lawyers Jacques Vergès, Mourad Oussedik, and Abdessamad Benabdallah, working in Algiers—do not speak from or directly to
the métropole, and their demand for legal reckoning on the order of Nuremberg is grounded not by a causal historiography but by mobilizing the post-Holocaust definition of genocide to press for international judgment of the French state for this crime (they are unequivocal: “il appartient à tous les hommes libres en France et dans le monde s’unir pour empêcher le génocide en Algérie”). The author-lawyers of this clandestine pamphlet surely recognized the improbability that their demand Nuremberg pour l’Algérie! would culminate in any such legal proceeding, and likely predicted that such a demand would strike many French readers as outrageous and absurd. By issuing such a demand, this text exposes a blindness built into World War II human rights legislation, highlighting exactly how certain bodies did not yet count (and had never counted) as subjects of those rights and protectible by those laws. The implicit thesis of Nuremberg pour l’Algérie! is not that genocide law had recently been broken under exceptional circumstances Algeria, but that such a law had never (yet) applied to colonized subjects.

The text takes up this problem as a work of translation. It seeks to resignify ‘police action’ as ‘genocide’ so that the colonizing state might be held accountable for crimes of appropriate magnitude. Like a script for a future trial, Nuremberg pour l’Algérie! opens with its charge, the first sentence signaling the work of translation:


This is followed by complete transcript of all nineteen articles of the International Convention on Genocide, then a series of numbered sections arranged as evidence of the ‘violation flagrante des conventions de Genève de 1949, ratifiées par la France’: first, a letter
signed by a military police sergeant describing his work for the Police Judiciaire in Algeria; next, a series of photographs depicting unidentified corpses in fields with the caption “prisonniers abattus sans jugement selon les directives des officiers généraux couverts par le commandement en chef et la délégation générale du Gouvernement” and another that transcribes the French military slang ‘corvées de bois,’ so that the photograph of corpse stands as translation. This is followed by a document taken from a military tribunal labeled ‘La parole d’un officier français’ that includes the text of an oath signed by French Colonel Roucolle and delivered to enemy ALN fighters swearing that they would be classified as soldiers and treated as prisoners of war subject to rights guaranteed by Geneva protocol (‘le mot soldat est souligné dans le texte’). The pamphlet concludes with two long lists of Algerian proper names: “1) Les prisonniers de guerre algériens livrés à l’arbitraire”, and “2) exécutions sommaires et parodie de justice.” What is the status of testimony here?

Copenal’s intercepted letter, sent from Sétif May 1960, is positioned as unwitting testimony from an agent of the state’s ‘police action.’ Copenal does not know that he testifies before an imaginary international court on the order of Nuremberg. He addresses a “cher vieux copain” in Sissonne (northern France), his colloquial, idiosyncratic French riddled with military slang and a smattering of colloquial French-assimilated Arabic words. The sergeant is new to his work in the Algerian bled—“ça fait presque deux mois que je suis en A.F.N.” (Afrique français du nord) he writes, and three weeks in the “P.J” (Police Judiciaire)—where his duty is to update police dossiers with photographs and information about suspected militants: “Je suis chargé en outre d’un registre où j’inscris tous les fellous arrêtés par nos bons soins.” The photographs and lists of names included just after this letter now look like material evidence culled from just such a police dossier, and make visible the strategic erasure of the crime into which Copenal is conscripted.
Jarvis

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Chapter Two

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Copenal appears to enjoy his work: “Nous avons un fichier avec les photos de tous les suspects terroristes et c’est un boulot vraiment intéressant.” His description of this ‘boulot’ takes for granted a reader familiar with the techniques: “Quand nous arrêtons un fell nous l’interrogeons et nous avons du matériel tout à fait persuasif. Tu vois ce que je veux dire.” The persuasive tactics made somewhat more explicit in Copenal’s next sentence are not unusual ones, but rather the routine interrogation techniques taught by the French military to its specialists so that torture would leave no traces on the bodies of those tortured: “E.E. 8 à l’oreille et aux bijoux de famille, ensuite la flotte dans la bouche, plus les coups de bâton et la branlée quand c’est fini.” Having used the dossier photographs to single out detainees for interrogation, Copenal more or less explains, it was often necessary to make them vanish altogether. His diction attends and completes the erasure:

Parfois il nous arrive de buter des fells. Qu’est-ce que tu veux qu’on en fasse après l’interrogatoire. Nous les emmenons à la nuit tombée dans le bled. Là une grande cave est aménagée spécialement. Les fells sont amenés au bord de ladite cave le P.A. sur la nuque et hop le grand saut. Tu parles si on se les dispute avec les Inspecteurs de la P.J. Au début, tu sais le premier que tu butes comme ça de sang froid ça te fout un choc, mais c’est comme toute autre chose on s’y habitue. Après cela tu vas peut-être me prendre pour un gangster.

The passive voice of the first sentence deflects agency; by ‘buter,’ Copenal surely means ‘kill,’ but he does not use any such word to describe his work. ‘Fells’ and ‘felloù’ are epithets for the Algerian detainees, a frenchified abbreviation of an Arabic word that designates a rural peasant farmer (fellah; it might also be fellagha). The second sentence begins as if it is a question, but ends as a declaration that leaves no room to imagine what else might be done with prisoners after their interrogation: in Copenal’s prose, there is only a ‘P.A.’ (pistolet automatique) to the back of the head and an unspecified cave at night in the bled, then the ‘fells’ hop into the great beyond.

The actions suggested through euphemism and allusion are now familiar from
detailed studies of French police and military techniques, while Copenal’s slang comes straight from the deranged lexicon of military French (séance, nettoyage, dégroississage, corvée de bois, interrogations serrées) that surely permitted torture specialists avoid imputing subjectivity to enemy bodies in pain. Copenal’s syntax and diction reflects the epistemological stakes of the problem confronted by the authors of *Nuremberg pour l’Algérie!*: there can be no genocide where there is no death, no murder, no torture, no victim, no human (‘pas d’humanité pour les arabes’). Notice how Copenal counts bodies:

Bilan de l’opération: d’abord les militaires ont gazé la grotte qui fait 180 mètres de profondeur, tu vois un peu cette installation. Ils sont entrés dedans et ont sorti 12 fells dont 2 sous-chefs et 1 aspirant (qui est mort suite aux gaz). Toutes les armes ont été récupérées, tu vois ça c’est du boulot. A part cela je peux te dire qu’il y a une semaine lors d’un décrochage, il y a eu 4 tirailleurs tués et 5 blessés, du côté fells ouallou.

The imprecision of Copenal’s accounting is neither irrational nor exceptional but rather reflects what Fanon described in 1961 as ‘ce raisonnement qui prévoit très arithmétiquement la disparition du peuple colonisé’ (Damnes 82). This is the same banal arithmetic that justified French legionnaires torturing families and throwing them from bridges in Kerrata in 1945, or legitimized an AFN sergeant executing suspected militants via pistol to the back of the head and discarding their bodies in rural caves in 1960. Copenal does the work of his nation’s police judiciaire: surveillance, manhunting. He is an agent of the state’s interest and force. His language exposes the violent force of law.

*Nuremberg pour l’Algérie!* forces into view an impasse separating the legal term ‘genocide’ from the clause ‘du côté fells ouallou.’ Copenal’s final sentence above (‘A part cela je peux te dire qu’il y a une semaine lors d’un décrochage, il y a eu 4 tirailleurs tués et 5 blessés, du côté fells ouallou’) articulates a French colonial rule inassimilable to the juridical definition of genocide. To apply the term ‘genocide’ is to claim that bodies count as subjects of legal rights and protections, while ‘fells ouallou’ can only be spoken of bodies that do not
count in these terms. The sergeant just doing his work (tu vois ça c’est du boulot) recounts the outcome of a recent skirmish: four killed and five injured tirailleurs (a term for Algerian, Moroccan, or Senegalese French soldiers), and aside from them ‘fells ouallou’. There is no particular number of ‘fells ouallou’ to count. ‘Fells’ is a French pluralization of an already abbreviated ‘fellah’ or ‘fellagha’—an appropriated word that conflates rural peasant farmer, thief, and enemy combatant (an appropriate semantic ambiguity given the huge logistical problem that French soldiers could not distinguish farmers from fighters). ‘Ouallou’ is a colloquial Arabic expression that might be glossed as nothing, wiped out, kaput, finished, done for, no good, empty, zeroed out. Copenal’s use of the word to refer to dead Algerians articulates the problem faced by the lawyer-authors Nuremberg pour l’Algérie: how to make ‘fells ouallou’ sound like ‘genocide’ so that the state be tried for its crime. But in what court would such a trial be held? 27

**Femmes Algériennes 1960**

During the same year that Sergeant Copenal posted his letter from Sétif, a young French conscript deployed to Algeria took a series of black and white photographs of displaced civilians, most of them women, who had been forced to abandon their homes and reside in the ‘campes de régroupement’ around the army barracks in which he was stationed.
Reflecting later on the portraits eventually published as *Femmes Algériennes 1960*, Marc Garanger—an aspiring photographer opposed to what he considered “cette guerre coloniale qui ne voulait pas dire son nom”—describes these images as testimonial, but his sense of justice does not seem to involve juridical processes or protocols. What is the testimony imagined by Garanger? To avoid the work typically assigned to conscripted soldiers, Garanger says that he maneuvered his way into the unofficial role of regiment photographer, taking 4cm x 4cm square identification portraits ostensibly for military surveillance purposes, but subverting the form. He writes:

> En arrivant au fond du bled, immergé dans le discours raciste que m’environnait de toute part, et puisque les mots étaient inutiles, j’ai décidé de m’exprimer avec mon œil, pour hurler mon désaccord…Pendant vingt-quatre mois, je n’ai pas cessé de photographier, sûr qu’un jour je pourrai témoigner. (121)

On a brief military leave in 1961, Garanger illegally smuggled six of the portraits with him to France and then passed them to the Swiss magazine *L’Illustré*, which—unknown to him until after the war—published the photographs weeks after Garanger returned to service. Not until 1981 were the photographs shown publicly, first in Arles, followed by hundreds of expositions (Venice, San Francisco, New York, Algiers). Not until 1982 did the book appear in print; the portraits continue to circulate in exhibitions and online. Garanger’s experiment with testimony as a visual text flies under the legal and military radar, so to speak; his photographs highlight the absence of language as a central problem by framing a violent silencing to which the photographer is a complicit witness.

In the handwritten statement that prefaces *Femmes Algériennes 1960*, Garanger reflects on his own conflicted complicity in this act of exposure: “The first days the portraits I took showed the women with their veils on,” he writes. “When I showed the image to the commander he asked for the veils to be removed.” Garanger appears ambivalent about
carrying out this order: “They had no choice,” he writes. “They were obliged to unveil themselves and let themselves be photographed. They had to sit on a cushion, in the open air, in front of the white wall of a mechta.”

In 1965, the photographer Pierre Gassman persuaded Garanger to print each portrait with a strong black frame against the broad white border of blank page, which highlights the singularity of each figure and the distinctiveness of each face in contrast to a homogeneous background. Of the subjects pictured on the glossy black and white pages of Garanger’s collection, some are old women; some are young girls; many have facial tattoos on their foreheads, cheeks, and chins, and many wear intricate silver earrings and necklaces; some are wrapped in shawls, and others sit with breasts exposed; a few smile, although most do not. Stunned by the eyes of the women who sat before him (“they were shooting me with their eyes!”), Garanger understands himself as mediator of their unspoken testimony: “J’ai réçu leur regard au bout portant, premier témoin de leur protestation muette, violente. Je veux leur rendre témoignage” (1).

Note the ambiguity of Garanger’s narrative position. Who testifies, exactly? Finding himself at a linguistic impasse—he does not share a language with the women he photographs, and even had he, what communication is possible under such circumstances?—Garanger fixates on the gaze that meets his own. He says he sees these women bearing silent witness to the injustice of colonial violation. It is not clear whether his desire to give them space to testify indicates that he hopes for them to speak, to speak for them, to give future viewers of the photographs the opportunity to imagine what they might have said, or to make their very silence signify. The eyes of his subjects therefore become a puzzle open to characterological fantasy and projection, a site where the impasse between verifiable and unverifiable becomes visible. This impasse helps to understand why testimony cannot be reduced to evidence, and why it opens so readily to fiction.
If the many portraits in *Femmes Algériennes 1960* make anything clear, it is the opacity of these subjects to Garanger’s act of framing. Despite exposure to bright sunlight against the spare white wall, despite being seen by the French soldier-photographer, the camera lens, the French police judiciaire, and a future public of international viewers, the faces and eyes in these photographs elude the many interpretations that they invite. This may be a powerful prompt for the viewer’s own desire to provide narrative and an ethical provocation, but it is not evidence.

If a viewer looks very closely at the eyes that Garanger claims were ‘firing at him’ in rage and humiliation, what is visible is not rage or humiliation but rather the faint but distinct reflection of tiny human silhouettes. That is, a viewer who looks closely at many of these portraits can actually see the image Garanger and another French soldier reflected in the shining eyes of the photographed subject. The rest must be imagined. What Garanger describes is not just an exercise of state violence but of the state’s failure to epistemologically construct knowable subjects transparent to its epistemological regimes. This exercise in compulsory portraiture is testament to a failure of the state’s classifying techniques and protocols; the photographs are a way of seeing what cannot be quantified, recorded, or proved. In other words, although these photographs appear to make something visible—to expose, to unveil, to make clear—they frame opacity, expose a limit.

While this opacity may elicit fantasies of accessibility or assumptions about the internal states of the photographed subjects, what the photographed eyes in fact reflect is a faint shadow of state and military force exercised to quantify, classify, track, and epistemologically construct its (colonized) subjects. So much escapes this frame, and so much escapes Garanger’s own subversion of the identification photographs he is compelled to produce. These photographs are not a record of what can be known but a gesture toward
all that cannot. This is not a record of what is quantifiable but a testament to the limits of verifiability, and a move across the impasse separating evidence from fiction. The photographs prompt literary questions, which are also ethical questions: What does she see? What does she think? What might she say? These questions are on the order of the one posed by Beauvoir concerning Djamila Boupacha: can her blood move us?

3| Djamila Boupacha, Absent Witness

Djamila Boupacha’s case ran aground on the aporia already brought into focus by those impossible trials imagined by La gangrène, Nuremberg pour l’Algérie!, and Femmes Algériennes 1960. Halimi understood the extremity of the political situation in 1960—“Toutes les procédures jusqu’alors avaient démontré que l’Algérien (témoin, accusé, ou partie civile) ne peut plus, comme l’exigent les principes du droit pénal, communiquer avec le juge” (144). Her defense of Boupacha at once performs and interrogates the genre of testimony by raising these questions: if testimony will not be heard by agents of a state founded on foreclosing the possibility of such speaking, then what else might testimony do? If the law is itself inherently violent and the juridical system mad, then what is the politics of testimony when it cannot stand as legal evidence? What is left for testimony when legal political means are exhausted? Under such circumstances of juridical failure, the literary dimension of testimony comes into full view.
The paratext of *Djamila Boupha*ca*ba* reflects a collective effort by metropolitan activists to short circuit this failure of their state’s legal system. The title page bears Djamila Boupha*ca*ba’s name in bold font and central position. At page top is printed SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR (who wrote its preface) and GISÈLE HALIMI (author of most the text’s 278 pages), while beneath the title *Djamila Boupha*ca*ba* is a long list of those whose ‘Témoignages’ corroborate Boupha*ca*ba’s own. It includes: Henri Alleg, Mme. Maurice Audin, General de Bollardiè*re*, R.P. Chenu, Dr. Jean Dalsace, J. Fonlupt-Esperaber, Françoise Mallet-Joris, Daniel Mayer, André Philip, J.F. Revel, Jules Roy, Françoise Sagan, and the painters Picasso, Lapoujade, and Matta.30

The portrait drawn by Pablo Picasso that appears on the cover and title page bears close resemblance to Garanger’s photographs, in particular because it too draws attention to the subject’s eyes. Picasso’s pencil drawing, signed with the date 8 December 1961, looks like it might have been taken from a page of *Femmes Algériennes* 1960, likely because Picasso drew this portrait from an identification photograph taken of Boupha*ca*ba in prison at Pau earlier that year.31 In Picasso’s image of her, Boupha*ca*ba’s face and shoulders appear against a white background32; her eyes are dramatically enlarged, emphasized by extravagant lashes and severe eyebrows, with pupils drawn by concentric black rings that appear to gaze steadily at the viewer. Picasso’s dramatic amplification of Boupha*ca*ba’s eyes seems to invite the viewer to imagine her as not only object but subject of sight, as if he shares with Halimi and Beauvoir a desire to render Boupha*ca*ba visible to the French-reading public as a witness capable of testifying on her own behalf and therefore worthy of recognition and protection by the state’s justice system.

Halimi frames her defense of Boupha*ca*ba in precisely these terms. When she telegrammed to provide legal service in mid-1960, Halimi did not yet know that Boupha*ca*ba’s
confession to planting the bomb had been forced through torture, but she knew French military and police tactics well enough to read the case file critically. Once Halimi had spoken with Boupacha and studied this dossier—battling bureaucratic intransigence that she took to be neither incompetence nor incoherence but a system that deliberately permitted ‘a parody of justice to play out without witnesses’ in French Algeria\(^33\)—she detected two crucial sentences typed in fine print at the conclusion of the four-page transcript of Boupacha’s court hearing (procès-verbal) held at the Algiers Palais de Justice a few months prior: “Je demande à être examinée par un médecin. J’ai été torturée” (19). Djamila Boupacha includes a transcript of Boupacha’s later account of this torture, which Halimi helped her to compose; the text also includes Halimi’s depictions of her interactions with Boupacha and of Boupacha’s experience at the Palais de Justice in Algiers, a scene that Halimi describes with novelistic precision\(^34\): Djamila sits straight-backed in handcuffs before a bored judge who dictates indifferently while a stenographer types up quadruple carbon copies of the false confession that she will be forced to sign (“Le juge dicte. La machine du greffier crépite” [39]) while the two police officers who had tortured her eavesdrop offstage (“Les policiers sont derrière la porte: de sa déclaration dépend la destination de son retour” [39]). The judge reads aloud the “aveux confectionnés” (39) and asks whether Boupacha has anything to add to the transcript. Here Halimi narrates as if from Boupacha’s perspective:

A ce moment, Djamila a envie de hurler. Les policiers sont toujours là. Tant pis, tant pis. Elle veut le dire.
Elle crie presque:
—Oui. Inscrivez que j’ai été torturée à Hussein Dey...oui, que j’ai souffert beaucoup…
Et soudain brisée:
—Je vous en prie... Il faut me faire voir...

(39, my emphasis)
Boupacha’s interruption of the court proceeding is suggestive. ‘Il faut me faire voir’ might be read as ‘I must be seen’ or ‘I need to see someone,’ that is, seen by a doctor who would examine her body for signs of trauma (electric shock, cigarette burns, and rape). The sentence also connotes a sense of coming-undone, as in: ‘I need to see someone.’ It might also be read, or mis-read, as ‘I must be made to see.’ This is the challenge that Halimi takes on: how to make Boupacha stand and be heard in French court as witness to her own violation.

The case turns on proving that Boupacha was raped, which is what Boupacha cannot quite say in the court scene as Halimi depicts it above. The open question posed by Beauvoir to readers of *Djamila Boupacha*—‘can the blood of one young girl move us?’—points to the epistemological and ethical stakes of demanding that Boupacha’s cry be heard and the perpetrators of violence against her charged with and tried for their crime. In the preface, Beauvoir counts Algerian bodies: ‘more than a million victims,’ ‘whole tribes’ exterminated in camps that currently hold ‘five hundred thousand’; “en effet, il y a 14000 Algériens enfermés dans les camps et les prisons de France, 17000 dans les prisons d’Algérie, des centaines de milles parqués dans les camps d’Algérie” (12). Beauvoir’s question is directed at readers who, like her, had grieved the decimation of the Warsaw ghetto, had followed the Nuremberg proceedings, and who were very like at that moment following the Eichmann trial. Beauvoir’s preface to *Djamila Boupacha* concludes:

Les efforts dépensés à propos de Djamila manqueraient leur but s’ils ne devaient éveiller la révolte contre les traitement infligés à ses frères, et dont son cas ne représente qu’un exemple très ordinaire. Mais cette révolte n’aura de réalité qu’une alternative: ou bien vous qui pleurez si volontiers et si abondamment sur des malheurs anciens—Anne Frank ou le ghetto de Varsovie—you vous rangez parmi les bourreaux de ceux qui souffrent aujourd’hui. Vous consentez paisiblement au martyres que subissent, en votre nom, presque sous vos yeux, des milliers de Djamila et d’Ahmed. (12)
Beauvoir’s question—‘can we be moved?’—is therefore not whether Djamila’s life can be made to count among those of so many thousands of Djamilas and Ahmonds, but rather: can Djamila Boupacha’s blood matter as much as Anne Frank’s? Can the destruction in Guergour, Djerah, or Kherrata move you like the razing of the Warsaw ghetto? If not, then why not? Why does one not equal another in your eyes? Why does one girl’s death elicit your profound grief while another’s rape and imminent execution not register as a potential loss of equal magnitude? Beauvoir’s focus on Boupacha’s blood suggests that these questions cannot turn on rational persuasion or arithmetic logic, but on some other kind of compelling force.

_Djamila Boupacha_ argues two positions: on the one hand, exoneration for Boupacha, who should voice her plaint and be rationally acquitted; on the other, accountability for her accused torturers who should be tried and judged according to the conventions of due process. Halimi’s struggle to collect evidence is a struggle with the rift marked by testimony between the verifiable (law) and the unverifiable (fiction); this dilemma centers on the problem of Boupacha’s blood. The lawyer’s narrative reads like compelling crime fiction, yet goes to great lengths to verify its claims with evidence: meticulous footnotes cross-reference court documents and sworn testimonies; fascimilie of prison visitation passes and travel visas confirm chronologies and itineraries; transcripts of police files, medical reports, and personal letters—including one handwritten by Boupacha, and an unedited letter from her father composed in phonetic French—generate a sense of intimacy and authenticy. Halimi describes a conversation with Boupacha’s mother that deepens this sense: “Mais aussi, avec une précision qui m’émerveillait, elle répondait à mes questions, et dépassant le cas de Djamila, elle me disait comment les militaires arrêtaient, torturaient, pillaeint. Elle me donnait des noms d’Algériens disparus, des dates…Quand Mme Boupacha fut à hauteur du
portail, elle se retourna brusquement et me cria : ‘N’oublie pas…mes yeux, je te les donnerai pour Djamila!’” (47-8). Halimi constructs Boupacha as a character and co-author, transforming her from mute prisoner into first-person subject of a civil plaint addressed to the highest legal office of the French Republic. 35 This task is literary:

Of the details on which her life depends, the most crucial is that by which Boupacha seems most concerned but about which she appears least willing to speak. The status of her virginity becomes the central problem (or, rather: problematic indeterminacy) of her case. Halimi emphasizes Boupacha’s reluctance to name or narrate sexual torture: “La jeune file darda sur moi des jeux brillants,” writes Halimi, “et d’une voix saccadée, presque à hoquets, elle parla…” (21). The prisoner hesitates; she puts her head in her hands; her hair falls across the paper on which Halimi takes notes; Halimi kisses Boupacha’s forehead; the pen falls to the floor; Boupacha reaches to pick it up; Halimi stops her hand and prompts: “Djamila, raconte, tu peux tout me dire; tu sais bien que je suis ici pour toi…” (22). Boupacha recounts but by metonym, inference, and omission: “Oui… Mais c’est une chose terrible. La bouteille, ils l’ont enfoncée… Tu sais, j’ai écrit au commissaire du Gouvernement pour être examinée par un docteur. Mais je veux une femme. Je ne pourrai pas raconter cela à un homme, tu comprends. J’ai écrit dans la lettre : « Je veux être examinée pour ma virginité… »” (22).

Although the ‘supplice de la bouteille’ is the ‘plus atroce des souffrances’ named in
Boupacha’s civil plaint (see 15-16 for this section of the plaint), this act is not recorded in her police file, which contains no evidence of torture aside from the typed sentences spoken by Boupacha when she interrupted the judge to insist that she be examined. Halimi notes with incredulity that all the documents in the file were hastily produced on 15 March 1960 (“dans cette même journée le juge avait accumulé les preuves” [43]) and zeroes in on the medical report signed by the court-appointed doctor who examined Boupacha after her hearing at the Algiers Palace of Justice. Halimi transcribes the full text of Dr. Levy-Leroy’s report (116) to highlight his contradictory claim: both that the patient suffered "troubles des règles qui sont de nature constitutionnelle" (116) and that he permitted her to keep her underwear on so as not to ‘humiliate’ her with a gynecological exam. “Cette pseudo-délicatesse n’explique rien,” Halimi objects: “S’il n’a pas examiné Djamila, si elle n’a pas fait allusion à ces sévices particuliers, comment pouvait-il savoir qu’elle souffrait de troubles constitutionnels des règles?” (49). Halimi reads between the lines—“c’était, en langage médicale, la traduction du supplice de la bouteille” (49)—but to persuade a judge to grant Boupacha a new hearing, she needs more evidence.

Halimi’s effort to accumulate evidence does not culminate in justice, but in a standoff over the verifiability of Boupacha’s account that derails the case. Halimi arranges for Boupacha’s transfer to a French prison in Fresnes so that she can be re-examined by a gynecologist outside Algeria. Five months have passed, however, and Boupacha’s physical wounds have healed, so the second medical report introduces reason to doubt but not to dismiss Dr. Levy-Leroy’s claim. Halimi transcribes this report with the key sentence in all-caps: “OUI, BOUPACHA DJAMILA A PU SUBIR L’INTRODUCTION D’UN GOULOT DE BOUTEILLE DANS LE VAGIN…peut-être EN FAVEUR D’UNE DEFLORATION TRAUMATIQUE” (140). The possibility of ‘traumatic defloration’ is reason enough to persuade the judge at
Caen to hear Boupacha’s case, and to call a third medical expert to testify in court, one who tended both to Boupacha and to her father (also imprisoned, also tortured) at the El-Biar ‘triage’ center. This ‘Dr. B...’ treated Boupacha twice when she returned from Hussein Dey complaining of ‘abdominal’ pain (186), but at the Caen hearing he claims not to know or remember whether he had noticed signs of torture on her body: “C’est possible,” he admits. “Je ne m’en souviens plus...Je ne sais pas si Djamila avait des traces de tortures sur le corps: je ne l’ai pas examinée nue” (187).

Dr. B’s closing statement at the hearing in Caen pits his faulty memory against Boupacha’s sharp one. Halimi notes that Boupacha recognized Dr. B immediately upon his arrival in court, and that she recoiled before the electrical torture device displayed to her by the judge to gauge her reaction to it: “—Alors, dites-nous? Vous avez déjà vu ça? Le juge insistait. Alors Djamila se leva brusquement et cria: — C’est la gégène ça! C’est la gégène!” (167). However, Dr. B claims not remember clearly enough to confirm or deny Boupacha’s account: “Ses déclarations peuvent correspondre à la vérité,” he says, “mais je n’en ai pas conservé le souvenir. Depuis février 1960 j’ai vu beaucoup de choses et tout ce qui est passé à cette époque n’est pas resté dans ma mémoire” (189). Impressed, the judge decides that nine identification photographs be shown to her to further test the acuity of her memory. She easily identifies the lieutenant and doctor from the El Biar detention center where she had been tortured, so the judge agrees with Halimi: “Quelle meilleure preuve Djamila pouvait-elle donner de la force de ses souvenirs et de ses possibilités de nous dévoiler à tous le visage de ses tortionnaires?” (191).

Boupacha never got the chance to identify of her torturers in court because military officers in Algiers simply refused to send the identification photographs. The final pages of *Djamila Boupacha* are a series of letters exchanged concerning this absent photographic
evidence. Persuaded by Halimi’s argument, the French Procurer General wrote to General Ailleret (superior officer of the French armed forces in Algiers) to request a list of documents—in particular, civil identification photographs that would permit Boupacha to identify the faces of the accused in court—but Ailleret refused, citing his duty to protect soldier ‘morale’ (see 194-5 for the full response). Likewise convinced by Boupacha’s performance and Halimi’s argument at Caen, Juge d’Instruction Philippe Chausserie-Lapree then wrote to the Procurer of the Republic to request intervention from M. le Garde des Sceaux Michelet and the Minister of the Army Messmer to requisition these missing documents with their authority (He writes: “J’insiste sur la possibilité de poursuivre l’instruction dans laquelle je me trouverai aussi longtemps que l’intégralité des documents et renseignements sollicités ne sera pas en ma possession” [198]). Michelet and Messmer did not intervene. “Que firent M. Messmer et ses sources autorisés? Ils tentèrent de jeter la confusion sur une situation fort claire, en droit comme en fait. Un juge demandait des photographies; un ministre les lui refusait: il y avait crime et la justice devant le dire et sanctionner” (213).

This crime was never tried in court either, not for lack of effort. Boupacha’s second civil plaint addressed to the highest court in France—Doyen des Juges D’Instruction at the Tribunal Civil de La Seine—accuses Ailleret and Messmer of concealing evidence and sabotaging justice. Her plaint speaks the arcane and precise language of the law. It is divided into four sections that lay out 1) the facts of her case, 2) the concealment of evidence by Messmer and Ailleret36 (citing article 61, paragraph 2 of the French penal code criminalizing such concealment; “ces documents ne peuvent être produits que par l’autorité militaire. Or ce sont les deux chefs de cette autorité qui on pris, d’un commun accord, le décision de refus” [203]), 3) an accusation that Messmer and Ailleret violate the basic norms of justice (citing article 114 of the penal code: “Existe-t-il un droit civique plus élémentaire que celui
d’obtenir justice quand on a été victime d’un crime? Existe-t-il un principe constitutionnel plus élémentaire que celui de la séparation des pouvoirs?” [204]), and 4) a technical argument grounded in French penal and military law and jurisprudence, urging the French high court to intervene on her behalf (citing doctrine dating back to 1933 to support her claim that the high court’s competence is concurrent, not exclusive, followed by article 6 of the Code of Military Justice: “Lorsque les militaires ou assimilés, poursuivis pour un crime ou un délit de la compétence des juridictions militaires, ont comme coauteurs ou complices des Français non justiciables de ces juridictions, tous les inculpés indistinctements sont traduits devant les tribunaux ordinaires, sauf dans les circonstances expressément prévues par une disposition spéciale de la loi” [207]). The ministry of justice received this plaint in silence, as Halimi notes. Djamila Boupha addressed the highest officers of the French state in the language of their law, and they ignored her.

The case of Djamila Boupha shows us that the problem of state violence cannot be figured by the absence of a witness who has been lost to history and rendered incapable of making plaints or testifying in a court of law. Boupha’s case forces into view a much different configuration of politically orchestrated absence: here is the foreclosure of a living witness with an exceptionally sharp memory who deposed two plaints according to the very letter of the law and was simply not heard. In this situation of juridical failure, testimony brings into focus the fictional procedures by which fact and evidence are produced, and opens a space outside the law to imagine and lay claim to justice that is not—yet—possible.
1 Halimi narrates her dialogue with Procurer General Schmalk: “—Croyez-moi…N’employez que les moyens légaux… Je le regardai, surprise : —Légaux ? —Oui… Il choisissait ses mots pour ne pas me heurter. —Oui, il vaut mieux ne pas ébruiter les choses, ne pas les répandre dans la presse… Et souriant : —Vous êtes assez coutumiers des communiqués, vous, les avocats parisiens…et ce n’est pas toujours efficace… Il avait raison. Ce n’était pas toujours efficace. Parce que c’était quelquefois trop tard. Mais, pour Djamila et pour d’autres, il était encore temps. Il fallait le dire, l’écrire, réclamer justice.” (41-2)

2 In *La force des choses*, Beauvoir gives a telling account of her meeting with Malraux, in which her simply keeps repeating the word ‘gangrene’, as if powerless to do anything else.

3 As Lazrreg and Sylvie Thénault demonstrate, the French campaign in Algeria assumed new force with the 1957 declaration of a ‘state of emergency’ that legalized the incursion of military authority into a juridical and penal infrastructure already well in place: a secret intelligence-gathering apparatus normalized the use of ‘clean’ torture in interrogation; an extensive network of detention centers (‘centres de triage’ and ‘centres de transit’) became sites for processing prisoners and extracting information from them; military tribunals were authorized to exact swift justice that circumvented requirements of due process and admitted evidence acquired through torture. Because this was not a legally declared ‘war’, prisoners were not designated ‘prisoners of war’ subject to the protections of the Geneva Convention.


5 These activists confronted what Hannah Feldman describes in her *From a Nation Torn* (2014) as “the particular problems of representing, experiencing, and ultimately contesting what contemporary political speech and popular discourse tried to dismiss as a non-war” (13). Note, too, that the very name ‘la Guerre d’Algérie’ (officially named by French national assembly in 1999) is itself parochially French. Algerians call the same war ‘al-thawra’ (revolt/revolution), ‘la révolution’, ‘thawra al-tahrir al-jaziriyya’, or ‘la guerre de l’indépendance.’

6 The threat posed by such texts to the state’s narrative authority might can be gauged by its aggressive reaction to their appearance: on 17 March 1956, a parliamentary decree was instituted (citing as precedent a colonial law of 19 July 1881) to permit French prefects to seize any ‘expressive works’ deemed a threat to state security. According to Benjamin Stora, between 1958-1962, 14% of all texts concerning the Algerian war were seized by French authorities; the seized texts were exclusively those that concerned torture, addressed atrocities committed by the French army in Algeria and France, or questioned either the war itself or the silences of the government about the war. Alleg’s *La Question* was the first text
seized under this law, quickly followed by La gangrène (discussed in this chapter). These seizures, prohibitions, and hearings escalated after 1958, as the war’s violence escalated to truly chaotic levels. House and McMaster discuss this escalation as an effect of DeGaulle’s general about losing the empire, challenging the ways in which historians have failed to discuss (or even acknowledge) this incoherent and brutal escalation.

7 Feldman argues that to call this period ‘postwar’ is to naturalize European experience of WWII and to erase the fact that 1945-1960s was in fact the very midst of anticolonial war; this shift from ‘post’ to ‘during’ is critical. She writes—and this is a point I developed in my first chapter—: “For the purpose of refocusing the lens through which we view the French mid-century from one preoccupied with the condition of being ‘after’ to one attentive to the conditions of existence ‘during,’ it is helpful to recall a few historical facts that similarly reframe the decades in question. In particular, it is instructive to remember that the uprisings that would eventually culminate in the 1954-1962 Algerian War of Independence actually began in 1945, precisely on 8 May, a date much better celebrated in Western histories as ‘Victory in Europe Day’...So, just as one moment of violence and genocide was ending and precisely as it was being celebrated with pageantry and parade, another episode in what the historian Abdelmajid Hannoum has recently coined a ‘violent modernity’ was beginning. Rather than discontinuous and contained, the history of war in France during the decades of decolonizing would prove ongoing and perpetual.’ (3)

8 Halimi notes that the editors of Le monde changed the word ‘vagin’ to ‘ventre’ to make this detailed description slightly less disturbing (if significantly more confusing). See Force, where Beauvoir gives a detailed account of her conversation with the editor at Le monde, who insisted on changing this word so as not to disturb adolescents who might read the article. She points out that the editors were far more concerned about traumatizing French teenagers than about the torture and rape of Algerians.


10 As Rene Maran announced in the infamous preface to his 1921 novel Batouala, and as Gary Wilder argues in his The French Imperial Nation-State.


13 For example, the trials of Maurice Papon (1981-1998) or of Klaus Barbie (1987). On the former, see House and Macmaster; on the latter, see Alice Kaplan’s “On Alain Finkielkraut’s ‘Remembering in Vain’: The Klaus Barbie Trial and Crimes Against Humanity”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Autumn 1992), pp. 70-86.

14 In the essay cited above, Kaplan writes: “Nothing inherent makes a discussion of colonialism cancel out a discussion of the *shoah*; nothing inherent makes a discussion of the *shoah* cancel out a discussion of the Third World. The political rift between the two world perspectives is both tragic and emblematic of our times” (79).

15 This point draws from Ariella Azoulay’s discussion of the aesthetics of potential histories; see her “Potential History: Thinking Through Violence”, in *Critical Inquiry* (2013). She writes: “My effort at reconstructing the constituent violence through that archive is in fact an effort to approach a discursive or archival point zero from which one could begin to see that which could not have been seen, as the discourse and the archives were part of that same regime-made disaster” (551).

16 Derrida, “Politics and Poetics of Witnessing” in *Sovereignties in Question*, pp. 65-96: “bearing witness is not proving” (75). “Bearing witness is heterogeneous to producing proof or exhibiting a piece of evidence” (75). “It does not mean ‘I prove,’ but ‘I swear that I saw, I heard, I touched, I felt, I was present.’ That is the irreducible sense-perceptual dimension of presence and past-presence, of what can be meant by ‘being present’ and especially by ‘having been present,’ and of what that means to bearing witness” (76).

17 Derrida, ‘Force of Law’: “Law is essentially deconstructible…Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, is not deconstructible” (242-3).

18 *La gangrene*—the argument of the text and the metaphors of its title—operates within the logic of ‘after’ WWII, tapping into a particular sense of shock and horror concerning the Nazi crimes. “We come after, and that is the nerve of our condition,” observes George Steiner in his 1963 essay ‘Humane Literacy,’ collected in the volume *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (1970). Steiner continues: “After the unprecedented ruin of humane values and hopes by the political bestiality of our age. That ruin is the starting point of any serious thought about literature and the place of literature in society” (4), and further: “I cannot accept the facile comfort that this catastrophe was a purely German phenomenon or some calamitous mishap rooted in the persona of one or another totalitarian ruler. Ten years after the Gestapo quit Paris, the countrymen of Voltaire were torturing Algerians and each other in the same police cellars. The house of classic humanism, the dream of reason which animated Western society, has largely broken down” (ix). In these sentences, Steiner draws a direct connection between the systematic violence exercised by the Nazis during the 1940s and that exercised by agents of *La plus grande france* during the 1950s, but a victim of the latter might correct Steiner’s implicit timeline by pointing out to him that the countrymen of Voltaire were in fact torturing Algerians for
decades before the Gestapo occupied Paris, and by suggesting to him that the house of ‘classic humanism’ was never not a broken or inhospitable home. This tension plays out in the form of *La gangrène*.


20 Michelet’s ‘infection’ metaphor might be enriched by some knowledge of his biography; active in the French Resistance (credited with staging the first act of the resistance in 1940), he was arrested by the Gestapo and deported to Dachau in 1943, where he was infected by the typhus epidemic, but survived. He was the last to leave Dachau because he stayed to aid the last of the sick prisoners. Made minister of the Army by de Gaulle in 1946; served as Minister of Justice during the least just, most violent years of the Algerian war (1959–1961). Note Beauvoir’s description of her meeting with Michelet about Djamila Boupacha: he obsessively repeats ‘gangrene,’ as if he has no power to stop the torture that only he is in the legal position to stop. See also Hannah Feldman’s excellent study of Michelet as urban redesigner of Paris in *From a Nation Torn*.

21 Boumaza was member of MTLD after 1945, accompanied Messali Hadj to France; joined the FLN; was close to Ben Bella; was information commissioner and deputy immediately after independence; opposed Boumedienne, was exiled to France in 1966.

22 A city just north of Sétif, near the Algerian coast.

23 In her introduction to *DJAMILA BOUPACHA* (1960), Simone Beauvoir contrasts the public grief for Nazi victims to the absence of comparable sentiment toward Algerians: “ou bien vous qui pleurez si volontiers et si abondamment sur des malheurs anciens–Anne Frank ou le ghetto de Varsovie–vous vous rangez parmi les bourreaux de ceux qui souffrent aujourd’hui. Vous consentez paisiblement au martyres que subissent, en votre nom, presque sous vos yeux, des milliers de Djamila et d’Ahmed.”

24 For such studies see Marna Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire*; Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars Clean Bodies*; Vidal-Naquet, *Torture et la République*.

25 This is discussed at length by Elaine Scarry in her classic *Body in Pain*.

26 “Et quand, préconisant des moyens précis, le colon demande à chaque représentant de la minorité qui opprime de descendre 30 ou 100 ou 200 indigènes, il s’aperçoit que personne n’est indigné et qu’à l’extrême tout le problème est de savoir di on peut faire ça d’un seul coup ou par étapes. Ce raisonnement qui prévoit très arithmétiquement la disparition du peuple colonisé ne bouleverse pas le colonisé d’indignation morale.” (Fanon, Damnés 82).

27 Even in *future* French legal trials, the crimes of French state against Algerians during this war would only emerge where framed by Vichy/Holocaust-related trials, although colonial violence is not the actual crime at stake in these trials. Alice Kaplan pinpoints the much-
publicized 1987 trial of Klaus Barbie for crimes against humanity as an episode that provoked public memory not just of French crimes during Vichy but also in Algeria, in which Jacques Vergès strategic defense of Barbie made the trial into “an abreaction, a single relived piece of trauma that brings other buried pieces back to life” (See Kaplan 76) [note of course that Vergès is a co-author of Nuremberg pour l’Algerie]. In their Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, Memory (2006), Historians Jim House and Ed MacMaster point to the 1997-1998 trial of Maurice Papon, one of the last great state trials for Vichy crimes against the Jews, as a watershed. Like Klaus Barbie’s, this trial for Papon’s WWII era crimes also exposed French state violence in other scenes, in this case by staging a trial-within-a-trial fixated on Papon’s role as a French officer in Algeria and as Paris Prefect of Police who authorized a 1961 police massacre of Algerians in Paris. House and MacMaster write: “It took about two decades for French society to play out the ‘Vichy syndrome’ and to come to terms with governmental responsibility and involvement in the Jewish Holocaust. But while the trial of Maurice Papon marked a kind of closure it simultaneously opened the door to an ‘Algerian syndrome,’ and a new preoccupation with truth work on the nature of colonial repression and violence” (10).

28 Garanger describes the first public showing: “Et la nuit est tombée en Arles en juillet 1981 sur le Théâtre Antique. Les portraits des femmes algériennes sont apparus, projetées en 8x8 mètres, en ‘fondu enchaîné’. J’ai lu dans le silence le texte manuscrit qui figure en tête de ce livre, et la projection s’est poursuivie sur les ‘you-you’ que les femmes de la Casbah d’Alger poussaient dans la nuit pendant la guerre pour provoquer l’armée française…Les projecteurs se sont ensuite rallumés et, après un moment de silence qui me parut interminable, les applaudissements des quelques deux mille spectateurs du Théâtre Antique ont éclaté!”

29 Malek Alloula analyzes such exposure in his study of colonial postcards Le harem colonial, which also suggests that the veil was read by the French as a sign of opacity and resistance to colonizing power, hence its compulsory removal (and any discussion of laws banning the foulard in France today must contend with this colonial history of compulsory unveiling): “Colonialism is, among other things, the perfect expression of the violence of the gaze, and not only in the metaphorical sense of the term. Colonialism imposes upon the colonized society the everpresence and omnipotence of a gaze to which everything must be transparent. The exercise of power, especially when the latter is arbitrary, cannot permit the maintenance of shadowy zones; it considers them equivalent to resistance. The colonial postcard, for its part, fully partakes in this violence.”

30 All three painters were moved by accounts of torture in Algeria; all painted hommages. Sartre wrote a preface to Lapoujades’ 1961 exposition (at galerie Pierre Domec, Paris) Peintures sur le thème des émeutes, triptyque sur la torture. The chilean surrealist painter Matta painted his La Question, Djamila after reading Henri Alleg’s testimony.

31 Picasso also might have seen Garanger’s portraits by December 1961, since six of them had been published by L’Illustré Suisse in early 1961. Like the photographs taken by Garanger or those in the dossiers used by Sergeant Copenal to do his work, this photo of Boupacha was a surveillance tool kept in her prison file.
32. This omission of the verdant backdrop evokes the white mechta wall behind Garanger’s subjects.


36. “Ces documents ne peuvent être produits que par l’autorité militaire. Or ce sont les deux chefs de cette autorité qui on pris, d’un commun accord, le décision de refus” (203).

CHAPTER THREE

UNTRANSLATABLE JUSTICE:
Yamina Mechakra’s Fiction for the Future

“One can love what resists translation without yielding to nationalism.”

—Jacques Derrida,
‘Language is Never Owned: An Interview’
*Sovereignties in Question* 2000

1 | *Shahid,* Untranslatable

Arriving by air into Algiers, it is impossible not to notice the colossal concrete monument perched on the cliff over the south curve of the bay. Called the ‘Maqam al-shahid’ in Arabic, this is by far the most prominent structure in the capital cityscape. It stands 93 meters above the heights of Madania, connected to the Riad al-Feth shopping esplanade and towering above the Musée des Beaux Arts and Jardin des Essais, directly below the flight path into Boumédiène airport if one is arriving from Europe. The Maqam al-shahid is feat of engineering—contracted to the Canadian firm Lavallin—on a precarious
cliff in an area at high risk for seismic activity and, during the 1990s civil war, for terror attacks. In French it is called ‘le mémorial du martyr’ or ‘le monument,’ as there is simply no other of comparable scale in the city or the country. In his study of the memorial complex that has crowned Algiers since the early 1980s, Emanuel Alcaraz compares the Maqam al-shahid to Parisian sites only to suggest that nothing in Paris can possibly compare: “à la fois de l’arc de triomphe, de la tombe du soldat inconnu, et de la crypte du Panthéon” (at once the Arc de triomphe, the tomb of the unknown soldier, and the Pantheon crypt) (12).

This tribute to Algeria’s revolutionary war dead is the monument of the independent, postcolonial nation-state. It was constructed on the twenty-year anniversary of Algerian independence (1982) in keeping with a plan outlined by President Boumédiène in 1972 to enshrine the F.L.N.-authorized nationalist epic nourished by veneration of those dead formally recognized by the state (name the constitution) as ‘shuhada’.1 The monument’s name reflects the site’s multivalent status and function: ‘maqam’ (monument, site, tomb, sacred place) is semantically tied to both ‘muqawama’ (resistance, fight) and to ‘qawmiyya’ (nationalism). ‘Shahid’—usually translated as ‘martyr’ and widely understood by Algerians to refer to those who died fighting the French in the war for national independence (not least because it was a formal category that warranted state recognition and remuneration to families of the ‘shuhada’)—most basically denotes a visual witness, one who sees with her or her own eyes. The term ‘shahid’ is an untranslatable, in the sense discussed by Barbara Cassin and Emily Apter; its semantic range is far more capacious and its Arabic uses far more quotidian than its usual translation as ‘martyr/witness’ can possibly capture. It is also not a term unique to Algeria, although the specificities of Algerian history have given it a particular nuance and charge.
‘Shahid’ is spoken as a verb in the call to prayer, a breath away from ‘shahada’, the term for the profession of faith; it shares a root (sh-h-d) with juridical terms for eye-witness testimony and also with a proliferation of words concerning sight and seeing (mashahad, for example, can be translated as ‘visible, perceptible, things seen, sights, visible things’).

Consider iterations of the simple verb (shahada), any of which a shahid might be said to do:

(I) to witness, to be witness, to experience personally, see with one’s own eyes, be present, attend, to see something, go through something, to testify, to bear witness, to attest, confirm, certify, testify, give testimony, give evidence, sign as a witness, to witness, to acknowledge, adjudge, to swear (by god), to notarize; (II) to see (with one’s own eyes), view, inspect, watch, observe, witness; (IV) to call (upon someone) as a witness (for something); to be martyred, to die as a martyr; (V) to utter the profession of faith, (X) to call upon someone or cite as a witness; to cite, quote; to attest; to be martyred, die as a martyr, die in battle, be killed in action.

The equivocal articulation of ‘shahid’ with its French and English translations (témoin, witness, martyr, specifically muslim martyr) is at the heart of this chapter precisely because the word lies at the center of contests for narrative authority over Algeria’s founding war. The concept also figures centrally, if silently, in the work of one of Algeria’s most challenging and least famous writers, the late Yamina Mechakra (1949-2013). Her fictional revision of this national epic bears careful rereading for Algeria’s new post-war time.

The Maqam al-shahid complex cultivates a sense of reverent intimacy with the dead and inculcates an F.L.N.-authorized and authorizing nationalist history in which the shuhada are venerated martyrs who sacrificed their lives in a righteous anticolonial war overseen by a unified anticolonial vanguard justly positioned to rule the new nation, as the F.L.N. has done since 1962. In an ordinance signed 2 December 1972, Boumédienne also set forth a plan for a ‘Musée national du moudjahid’, now located directly beneath the Maqam al-shahid. Visitors to the complex descend into this subterranean museum led by volunteer guides through series of rooms and dioramas organized as a teleology of significant dates characterized by conspicuous omissions. This walk culminates in a room dedicated to
Independence day (July 5, 1962), creating a distinct general impression that—as Malika Rahal notes of the nationalist epic—anything after “the year 1962 is simply not history” (125). Throughout the underground complex, a recording of Algeria’s national anthem repeats over loudspeakers, its refrain an iteration of the noun ‘shahid’ in the form of an imperative verb that quickly gets stuck in the mind: ‘Fa-shhadū! Fa-shhadū! Fa-shhadū!’ (“So bear witness! bear witness! bear witness!”). A tour concludes with descent into an even deeper subterranean mausoleum (maqbara) consecrated to the shuhada, a circular space around a marble pulpit on which stands an opened Quran; here suras are intoned over the sound system and are engraved on the walls, and visitors speak in whispers if at all. Because nothing after 1962 figures into this sacred space, the Maqam al-shahid invites no reflection on how its theologico-political origin narrative has since been instrumentalized to sanctify sacrifice in order to justify force.

This is the political territory into which Mechakra ventures by way of fiction. Mechakra’s best known novel *La grotte éclatée* stages moudjahida testimony only to subvert the state-domesticated genre, transforming it from nationalist romance into dissident tragedy on the order of Antigone—and in fact that the Greek tragic is a tropological archive claimed by Mechakra as belonging to an affective and aesthetic territory that transcends the political and ideological limits of the modern Algerian nation-state. Mechakra’s fragmented revision of the national epic channels a vast archive of intertexts. Her bookshelf (described to me by her mentor, now head of psychiatry at Drid Hocine) held the complete works of both Gerard de Nerval and Holderlin; she was also a reader of Rimbead, Gide, Artaud, Celine, and lays claim to Greek tragedy, Augustine, the Kahena, Dido, Tacfarinas, Hafiz, Abdelkader, Césaire, Chaoui and Mozabite songs and stories to which she refers as ‘oralité ancestrale.’
Furthermore, *La grotte éclatée* is also a radical experiment in finding words for war that cannot be made useful to the state. *La grotte éclatée* is so vivid (and mimics such a familiar genre) that readers assume it autobiographical, yet it is emphatically not. At the text’s midpoint explosion, it comes unhinged. Generic and temporal order give way. Prose unravels; time veers out of joint. The question to ask is not ‘what genre is this?’, but rather: how to read this coming-undone? *La grotte éclatée* is a radical experiment in finding words for war that cannot be made useful to the state. It bristles with questions that resonate for Algerian readers in the present. By secreting the term ‘shahid’ to venture into a thicket of testimony, Mechakra transforms the sanctioned national liturgy into a lament more powerful, plural, and strange. What remains to write and think with if the poison of nationalist ideology is cut away from an oversaturated word like ‘shahid’? If the dangerous transmissions of the nation-state can be quieted then what other losses become perceptible, what plaints audible, what claims legible, what forms of justice imaginable?

*La grotte éclatée* has been reprinted four times since 1979, when it first appeared (SNED 1979, ENAL 1986, ENAL 1991, ENAG 2000), but is yet to be published beyond Algiers despite an ardent preface by Mechakra’s close friend Kateb Yacine. While *La grotte éclatée* was translated to Arabic by Aïda Barnia in 1989 (*Al-magharah al-mutafajjirah*, ENAL 1989), adapted for theater in 2007, and is now being re-translated to luminous Arabic by the poet Lamis Sáïdi—who staged a theatrical reading of excerpts of the novel in Algiers just before Mechakra’s death, and also read spontaneously from her Arabic translation at Mechakra’s public memorial service in 2013—the novel has never been published or distributed in France nor has it (yet) been published in English translation. Mechakra’s obscurity suggests at once that her aesthetic vision has not lent itself to the dominant market
conventions that determines which texts enter transnational circulation nor to the ideological constraints of a regime that has long claimed narrative authority over Algeria’s founding war.

La grotte éclatée was first published in Algiers in 1979, yet Mechakra’s concluding signature (‘Septembre 1973’) calls attention to the fact that she composed the text many years before its eventual publication as a novel—a delay due in large part to the novel’s perceived or potential dissidence, as Mechakra has remarked in interviews. Composed of fragments that Mechakra wrote and published over the arc of years linking Boumédiene’s long dictatorship (1965-1978) to Bouteflika’s even longer four-term rule (1999-present), La grotte éclatée poses subversively as moudjahida testimony. Its keenly tragic register and fragment form disrupt nationalist historiography on multiple registers.

At first glance La grotte éclatée is an exquisitely-written romance of the revolutionary war, which is of course a canonical and enthusiastically state-sanctioned genre. La grotte éclatée was published by the great state publishing house SNED, which monopolized literary publishing in Algeria during the 1970s. The novel’s unnamed narrator—a moudjahida—serves as an F.L.N. medic who hides for three years (1955-1958) with her comrades in a remote cave at the Algeria-Tunisia border as the war escalates. She tends to the wounded and buries the dead; she comes to love her patients Kouider, an old maquisard, and Salah, a legless orphan; she conceives a child with a dying fighter named Arris (a shahid), and gives birth alone in the cave. At the novel’s precise midpoint (October 1958), French napalm and bombs destroy the cave and shatter the novel’s narrative and temporal order such that what read as prose récit is transformed into anguished lament in verse form. The novel concludes at the date of national independence (5 July 1962) with the narrator’s solitary pilgrimage to the ruins of the shattered cave, where she privately grieves her losses before carrying on to Constantine with her handicapped child Arris on her back. La grotte éclatée asks to be read as
a revolutionary war récit, yet at the novel’s precise midpoint—the bombing—what read as a soldier’s testimony comes unhinged, and generic and temporal order gives way to something else. Prose unravels; time veers out of joint. The question to ask of Mechakra’s text is not ‘what genre is this?’, but rather: how to read this generic giving-way, this prose-coming-undone?

The violence of nationalism is both presaged and contested by a literary text such as Mechakra’s, although a novel does not constitute a political intervention so much as an invitation to imagine other than what given conditions permit. Reading La grotte éclatée in the present demands sensitivity to the politics of language and the power of naming, and also invites reflection on the deadly stakes of semantic distinctions and performative repetitions that continue to determine which lives qualify for sacrifice, which killings count as crimes, and which deaths warrant commemoration and recognition not just in contemporary Algeria but in our postcolonial time.

2 | Blanking out

The word ‘shahid’ appears on the pages of La grotte éclatée exactly once. It is not a word claimed by Mechakra’s narrator but one set apart by her as belonging already to the ideological lexicon of a nation-state-in-the-making. Her tone shifts abruptly when she awakens at the Centre Psychiatrique de la Manouba (Tunis) after the bombing dated October 1958, a formal caesura that cuts the text. Her arm is missing, mind disturbed (“Je réclamai la folie” [96]), friends blown to bits, infant son’s eyes scorched out by napalm and legs destroyed in the explosion. Waking wounded and stunned in Tunis, the narrator does not refer to her dead friends as ‘shuhada’ but rather as “des héros transformés en chair pourrie gisaient sous les dégâts de bombes, oubliés de tous sauf peut-être de quelque ami
lointain…” (101). Tunis—the headquarters of F.L.N. strategic operations and of her convalescence—is to her a site of strategic forgetting: “Pour Tunis ces hommes n’avaient jamais existé. Sur ces hommes que j’avais aimés, l’oubli était retombé lourdement” (100-101); “Là-bas, à quelques centaines de kilomètres, ce soleil si bienfaisant à Tunis transforme mes frères en charognes puantes” (116). Indifferent to her new status as celebrated war hero and her honorific promotion to lieutenant, she instead dwells morbidly on mutilation and loss: “On me promut lieutenant. Deux étoiles sur mon épaule sans bras. C’était le prix de mon handicap… A Tunis, on me regardait comme une héroïne” (100).

Here ‘Tunis’ operates as metonym for the F.L.N.—an impersonal and faceless ‘on’ who promotes her to lieutenant, pins stars to the empty shoulder of her uniform, and delivers the charred body of her child into her one remaining arm. After the temporal break (October 1958) the novel’s prose gives way to verse and repetition of different kinds, including citations from the F.L.N. newspaper El-Moudjahid and lapses into forms of bureaucratic list and report (medical dossier, psychiatric evaluation, military transcript) that read as parodic, as if to register the alienation of a war-traumatized person compelled to transcribe her pain in institutional language that cannot do it justice:

On me remena le corps de mon fils:
Age: deux mois.
Victime du napalm.
Mon fils vivant, aveugle et sans jambes. Mon fils brûlé. (96)

Each description of the mutilated child Arris accents his status as tragic archetype, blinded and legless. The narrator’s ironizing description of the child’s missing legs links the concept of martyrdom (which is, recall, the usual translation of ‘shahid’ by Algerian French speakers) with mutilation and murder: “mon fils, visage sans yeux tués par le napalm, mon fils bambin aux jambes assassinés” (101); “Mon fils mutilé par le feu” (102); “Enfant aux jambes martyres” (102). The status of the broken infant as living or dead is also rendered
syntactically and typographically ambiguous by the text, so that at points the reader is invited to wonder if the child of whom this survivor speaks is a figment of the narrator’s own hallucination. Consider the typographic white space and semantic ambiguities that riddle the narrator’s first-person direct address to her dead lover Arris:

J’irai retrouver ma rivière et, de la main qui me reste, je frotterai mes seins et mon ventre de bâtarde d’un sang jeune qui chante, qu’on a arraché des entrailles bouillonnantes d’amour de milliers de mères, penchées sur un enfant qui n’existe plus.

Comme elles, je suis penchée sur mon fils qui n’existe plus une grande ride sur le dos.

Comme elles, je tresse encore des couronnes sur le front de mon fils qui n’existe plus.

Comme elles, mes seins pleurent encore des larmes de lait.

Comme elles, mon ventre frémit encore sur un enfant dont se souviennent mes entrailles.

Comme elles, ma mémoire vacille : mon fils que je vois n’est pas.

(142)

The text cultivates ambiguity and opacity around the figure of Arris. Most descriptions of Arris—the proper name of both the eyeless and spectral child and of the dead soldier with whom the narrator conceived this child—refer to vision trouble, and not only the narrator’s own (‘mon fils que je vois n’est pas’). The battle-wounded Arris was also half-blind: “Il avait perdu un œil … de l’œil qui restait il me regarda comme on regard quelqu’un pour qui on n’a pas changé” (70). That is, the novel’s central ‘shahid’ figure—this direct eye-witness and martyr of the anticolonial struggle—here appears to be not a subject of sight but of blindness. The name ‘Arris’ marks a point of impasse in visual and textual transmission, a sign of glitch or static that poses significant resistance to the implicit promise of direct eye-witness, willing self-sacrifice, and first-person testimony that typically fuse together in the word ‘shahid.’

In La grotte éclatée the word ‘shahid’ and the ideology of martyrdom belong to the masculine collectivity of ‘Tunis,’ to the implicitly masculine ‘on’ of a nation-state in the
process of performatively establishing itself as the new rule law. The word appears in the following sentence: “Le F.L.N. décida la circoncision de tous les fils de chouhada. On offrit à Arris une gandourah blanche et un tarbouche rouge” (104). Here the F.L.N. steps in as proxy patriarch responsible for circumcising the male children of the revolution’s dead soldiers. Circumcision is not this grieving mother’s ritual, just as ‘chouhada’ is not her word. The Abrahamic rite, much like the gandourah and tarbouche foisted upon her child, are not traditions that she recognizes let alone claims as her own—much like the institutional language that she cites yet rejects.

An illegitimate orphan raised by Catholic sisters in Constantine, “sans fiche d'état civil, sans nom, sans prénom…une hors-la-loi” (34), this narrator is not a Muslim (or a Jew, or a Christian) but rather describes herself as moving easily between “trois grands mondes où je n'avais pas de frontière: celui de Moïse, celui de Jésus, et celui de Sidna Mohamed” (33). She learned the word ‘circoncision’ from a Jewish schoolmate in Constantine, and makes a brief and unsuccessful effort to teach this word to her already-mutilated child before he is submitted to the F.L.N.’s ritual knife:

—C’est pour ton circoncision, lui chuchotai-je à l’oreille. Il s’arrêta de jouer un instant puis fit grincer sa boule.
—La circoncision. J’avais rencontré ce mot à l’école.
—La fille de Dinah, la juive, m’avait remis des gâteaux et glissé à l’oreille:
—C’est à l’occasion de la circoncision de mon petit frère.
—Qu’est-ce que c’est la circoncision?
—On lui coupe un morceau de son truc.
—Pourquoi?
—C’est comme ça chez nous, les Israélites.
—Je fis jouer mes doigts dans les cheveux frisés de mon fils qui accrochaient mes ongles.
—Demain, c’est ta circoncision.
—Mon fils ne m’écoutait pas, le grincement de sa boule le préoccupait. Alors j’imaginais un fils qui parlait et me regardait avec des yeux vivants, non tués par le napalm.

(104)
Once more the text stages a glitch around the figure/name of Arris. The child’s eyes are deadened by napalm. He cannot see his mother, nor does he recognize her voice or listen to her words. This Abrahamic inheritance is disrupted, threatened, tenuous at best—the ritual transmission fails.

When her infant’s cut becomes infected by the unsanitary instruments of F.L.N. functionaries who assume paternal obligation in place of the absent ‘shuhada’, something strange begins to happen to the narrator’s mode of address. “Quelque temps après sa circoncision,” reports the narrator, “on me remit mon fils. Le soir, il fut secoué d’une forte fièvre” (105). Her address to Arris becomes urgent supplication. As she pleads with an infected (and now foreskin-less in addition to eyeless and legless) Arris to stay alive through the night, a strange disruption unsettles her sentences:

Toute la nuit, au chevet de mon fils, à moitié consciente, je le suppliai de ne pas s’en aller.
   Je lui disais les randonnées que nous ferions ensemble le long des sentiers de nos villages.
   Je lui disais nos grands-mères cassées en deux, roulant leurs doigts d’artistes
   un fin couscous que nos infinis champs de blé avaient mûri au soleil.
   Je lui disais nos monts qu’une auréole de neige couronnait toute l’année.
   Je lui disais la quobba de Sidi Othman qui surplombe la plaine de Meskiana, vers laquelle se levaient les regards
   quand les cœurs réclamaient une aube paisible et de l’eau
   pour nourrir la terre, remplir les greniers.

(105-6)

The typographical blanks and gaps are not the only glitch in these lines. After each iteration of reported address (“Je lui disais…”) the coordinating ‘que’ that a reader instinctively expects here is missing. Are these sentences? Grammatically, they are not exactly sentences but clauses spliced together around an absent conjunction; the implied independent clause reports speech but the (implied) subordinate clause is not a description of that speaking so much as a visual and affective invocation or opaque paraphrase. How
might we read this disrupted syntax, this odd blank in the line? “Je lui disais nos grands-mères cassées en deux… Je lui disais nos monts qu’une auréole de neige couronnait toute l’année…” (105). What is a reader to imagine this mother actually saying to her sick child? “Je lui disais la quobba de Sidi Othman qui surplombe la plaine de Meskiana…” (105-6). The typographical blank spots are not the only glitch in these lines. After each iteration of reported address (“Je lui disais…”) the conjunction that a reader might expect is missing; there is no finite verb, and the reported clause is not in implicit guillemets. What is a reader to imagine this mother actually saying to her sick child? The occluded speech act signaled by variations of the phrase ‘Je dis’ or ‘Je dis à mon fils’ repeats throughout La grotte éclatée after this, in verse that cultivates an escalating energy of sung lament or incantation. The repetition is liturgical, yet an intimate rather than sovereign voice.

A mode of direct maternal address signaled by variations of the phrase ‘Je dis’ or ‘Je dis à mon fils’ repeats throughout La grotte éclatée after this point, appearing in verse form that cultivates the escalating energy of sung lament. The lament culminates on the text’s concluding page, which is addressed to Arris in the familiar second person. The grammatical glitch also recurs in each iteration, each time slightly differently. For example, this address to Arris is replete with untranslatable toponyms, as if with words the parent creates a landscape for her blinded child:

Je dis à mon fils Alger la languissante et blessée, tremblant pour l’indépendance.
Je dis à mon fils Constantine et Kef Chkara.
Je dis à mon fils La Kabylie et Amrouche, Tlemcen et sa colère, Oran et sa revanche.
Je dis à mon fils les Aurès et ma peine.

(118)

A mother speaks things visible to a blind child whose life is on the line. The clauses are not description or communication but untranslatable proper names; they invoke and create
resistance. The blanks in these lines do not indicate that something is unrepresentable or untransmissible. She turns the sky and the land into words; she cites proper names. They are transcribed as French yet to imagine the words spoken is to hear not-French: la qobba de Sidi Othman, Alger, Qasantina, Kef Chkara, La Kabylie, Amirouche, Tlemcen, Waharan, Casbah. Moreover: Je dis à mon fils les Aurès et ma peine—how to transform the Aures and her pain into language? There is a novel in that sentence. (In fact, ‘Ma grotte and ma peine’ was the title Mechkra gave this text, before editor Marcel Bois suggested ‘La grotte eclatee’).

The maternal address continues:

> Je me souviens des cieux de mon pays.
> Je dis à mon fils le ciel moutonneux d’Alger, son soleil debout sur la Casbah, sa capitale.
> Je dis à mon fils le ciel propre et immense coiffant un lointain soleil qui s’insinue dans les ruelles de Constantine la secrète.
> Je dis à mon fils le ciel sombre et envoûtant, casquant un soleil jaune et ruisselant accroché aux rocs aurésiens encore couverts de neige.
> Je dis à mon fils le ciel horizontal et flottant, rafraîchissant un soleil rouge et viril, de peur qu’il ne brûle Tlemcen l’andalouse.

(118-119)

This is an experiment with forms for testimony liberated from the ritual repetitions that establish the authority of the F.L.N. (a gandourah and a tarbouche and a circumcision for every male child of the shuhada !). Not only does the narrator decide to name the child herself—Arris is her choice, and an illegal move according to both state and religious law—but she refrains from teaching him the word ‘circoncision’ and speaks to him instead in this opaque yet moving language riddled with blanks and glitches. It is an act of cosmogenesis. By departing subtly but surely from the governing rule of easy iterability, these lines stage a slight break with a logic that performatively establishes laws through repetition, be they grammatical or Abrahamic or juridical. The prose creates something else. Here the promise
of testimony is that it is iterable and transmissable yet opaque, protected. What carries over in the absence of transparency? That is a secret. Yet something moves. The blank is a silence, a space for the reader—an invitation to co-creation. (Mechakra says as much in an interview, addressing a letter to a friend: ‘Simone, là où tu vois du blanc, écris… ces blancs, pour moi, c’est reprendre le souffle. J’écris et je laisse à l’autre, au lecteur, un moment de réflexion, de paix aussi… le blanc est une écriture’ (in Mokhtari 79)).

When the address culminates on the concluding page of La grotte éclatée it resonates with powerful grief. The final page of La grotte éclatée is framed by two dates (5 July 1962, September 1973). The narrator carries her child along the road from Arris (the place) to Constantine after she has completed a solitary pilgrimage back to the ruins of the shattered cave to leave flowers and grieve her dead friends. This reads:

5 JUILLET 1962

Sur le chemin d’ARRIS, je rencontrai le regard indifférent de quelques rares voyageurs.
Le soleil se noyait de chaleur.
Je retrouvai un instant Constantine.
J’arrêtai mon regard sur les yeux de mon fils.
Arris, mon fils, tu étais ma révolte.
A toi, aujourd’hui, mon enfant,
Je dis ton père mort, sur ses lèvres mon amour.
Je dis ma maison tuée là-bas au pied d’un arbre qui blasphème à la face du ciel.
Je dis mes amis écrasés d’oubli, mais vivants encore dans la mémoire d’un vieux chacal ; il vient chaque soir déchirer la nuit de lents sanglots.
Je dis ma foi en demain, clouée sur ma poitrine.
Je dis ARRIS mon pays et ses moissans
ARRIS mes ancêtres et mon honneur
ARRIS mon amour et ma demeure.

Septembre 1973

(175)
In September 1973, Mechakra rewrites the date of Algerian independence as a date of ritual mourning for lost lives to which the new nation is indifferent except as generic symbols of sacrifice. The narrative tense and terms of address shift here to a simple present and intimate second person (tu) that appears to directly address the living (if terribly damaged) child. Although this formulation appears more direct and intimate than in previous iterations—as if inviting the reader to enter the space of second-person address—the grammar of these sentences remains enigmatic, and these words do not report or transcribe speech so much as they signal yet again the impossibility of such transcription. How does one speak ‘your dead father, my love on his lips’ or ‘my murdered home there at the foot of a tree that blasphemes in the sky’s face’ but by pressing at a cusp of intelligibility, at the limit of language? Just what is transmitted by a clause like this: ‘my friends crushed by forgetting but still alive in the memory of an old jackal that comes every night to tear the night with slow sobs’? The lines limn loss and register absence; the blankness and silence makes a space for the grief of the reader. The sentences appear designed not to transmit so much as to register loss. They are designed to move.

This poetics opens to mourning the singular lives effaced by the FLN’s reductive translation of ‘shahid.’ Mechakra’s narrator implicitly counterposes the proper name ‘ARRIS’ to the state’s abstract category of ‘shahid’. This speaker mourns her dead in an address open to a future (“ma foi en demain”). Her lament culminates with triple repetition of the untranslatable (ARRIS)—a word neither French nor Arabic, the name of her dead lover, her mutilated child, her ancestral home, and also the title of Mechakra’s second novel. The matter to consider is not what this proper name means, because the word does more and other than mean. What does saying it do? It may be impossible to know, at least for now—and yet there is an implicit promise of a life-saving transmission. Mechakra’s silencing of the
untranslatable shahid reads as an act of semantic protection from the selective amnesia endorsed by the state’s commemorative practices, experimenting with testimony that moves and reanimates the fissures of speakability instituted and governed by the terms of the nation-state.

3 | Sentences executed

Mechakra imagines a juridical scene that brings to light the dissenting quality of her literary experiment with testimony. Set in the early part of the narrative, before cave and text come undone, this scene depicts a military tribunal carried out by maquisards inside the cave. Here two war prisoners, an Algerian harki and a French military conscript, are tried, judged, and executed by F.L.N. militants for the crimes of French colonialism. The second, composed as a dialogue between the narrator and her psychiatrist in the Tunis hospital, is not a trial in any obvious way, yet it too raises questions of justice. This is precisely the point: Mechakra presses the matter of justice beyond juridical limits and sanctioned nationalist discourse.

This scene of judgment cast the narrator’s own acts of mourning in tension with—or defiance of—the acts performed by representatives of the state-in-the-making; here the Antigone is a vivid intertext. The narrator performs acts of devotion to and solidarity with the dead, but which dead? Mechakra’s text activates the full force of tragedy to lament those whose deaths would go uncounted and unrecognized by the postcolonial state in which she lived and wrote—whether in 1973 or in 1999. Mechakra’s casting of the moment of state-formation as tragic assumes new critical valence during and after the tragedy of civil war, not least by opening this question: if sacrificial violence is inherent to the legal institution and
self-preservation of the nation-state, then how might justice be figured outside the state’s language and terms?

The F.L.N. tribunal scene appears at the end of a chapter that primarily concerns the narrator’s work tending to the bodies of wounded and dead soldiers; it is the first sections of *La grotte éclatée* to appear without a date, falling between between chapters dated 1957. The trial thus appears to interrupt the quotidian temporality of life in the cave: “La nuit, nous eûmes une visite de plus inattendues: des maquisards et deux prisonniers, un soldat français et un harki. Nous dûmes assister à deux brefs interrogatoires” (55). The narrator’s ‘nous’ refers to her close circle of friends—the wounded maquisard and World War I veteran Kouider, the illiterate shepherd child Salah whose lost his legs to a land mine—and pointedly excludes the F.L.N. fighters and their prisoners. The visual and spatial details that comprise the scene highlight this divide; these details are channeled through the narrator’s attentive observation of the faces and gestures of her friends who silently watch the maquisards (two of whom are German students who abandoned university in East Berlin to join the F.L.N.) carry out interrogation around the fire at the center of the cave, an effect that at once produces an impression of intimacy among the narrator and her companions and a strong sense of their alienation from the tribunal process: “Ce long Allemand que les copains appelaient ‘Ali Lalmani’ passionanait Salah. Il ne le quittait pas des yeux. Ses longues jambes croisées autour d’une mitraillette l’intriguaient” (55; Ali Lalmani: ‘Ali the German’).

The prisoners themselves enter the scene as dossier entries, “deux symboles vivants” (56) who are archetypal enemies of the F.L.N. Their names accent this symbolic status: the Algerian harki is an Arabic version of ‘so-and-so son of so-and-so’ and also a homophone of F-L-N, as if to slyly suggest that the ultimate traitor—an Algerian who fights for the
French—is closer to the F.L.N. than its partisans might like to imagine, while the French soldier could be one of so many thousands of unwitting young conscripts:

Nom: FLEN BEN FLEN
Prénom : Taïeb
Age : 38 ans
Lieu de naissance : El-Asnam

Deuxième interrogatoire.
Un petit blond s’avança : un appelé.
Nom : GASPARD
Prénom : François
Age : 21 ans
Lieu de naissance : Metz

The judge is an F.L.N. maquisard depicted as a committed and fair-minded patriot—“il n’avait pas joué avec la vie, il n’avait point triché: il serait le juge des deux prisonniers” (56)—who testifies solemnly on behalf of the Algerian people. On behalf of what people does the judge speak?

Mechakra’s staging makes evident that her narrator’s ‘nous’ is not the same as the ‘nous’ pronounced by the tribunal judge. The judge’s pronouns announce a masculine ‘nous’ injured by French colonial violence, a crime for which the two prisoners before him will be held responsible. In his charge against the harki, the judge lays a possessive claim to the violated bodies of women, fetuses, and children, who are implicitly not of his ‘nous’. He makes an example of the orphan child Salah’s mutilation and suffering in order to emphasize his larger point about the injustice done to an Algerian masculinity that Taïeb Flen ben Flen has betrayed:

Tu as tué nos enfants et violé nos femmes. Tu es Algérien pétri dans la chair algérienne ; chacun de tes gènes porte en lui la lettre rouge de l’honneur frustré… ta femme est à l’abri; nos femmes sont violées. Nos fœtus servent de ballons aux légionnaires. Tes enfants vont à l’école, ils n’ont pas peur, ils n’ont pas faim, ils ont chaud en hiver. Regarde-le (et il montra Salah du doigt. L’enfant dans un geste de confusion chercha à cacher ses jambes). Il n’a point de jambes, ses mains sont sales,
The subject of this grievance is a collective ‘nous’ that pointedly excludes the raped women and mutilated children whose plaints register only indirectly. Salah is mutely discomfited by the judge’s gesture of inclusion, and hides his injury from view. The testimony of the accused harki—who is also a victim of colonizing violence, as he objects: “Je n’ai commis aucun crime; j’avais faim” (59)—is not relevant to this proceeding; here it is the testimony of a ‘nous’ voiced by the judge that matters. It is difficult not to be sympathetic to such an injured party—graphic details from the long history of colonial terror are persuasive—yet Mechakra’s scripting also makes it difficult not to notice that the judge’s ‘nous’, however justified its plaint, does not speak on behalf of the characters through whose silent observation and absence she constructs the scene.

The ‘nous’ of the judge’s charge against the French conscript François Gaspard is likewise riven. Here he narrates a counterhistory of Europe’s twentieth-century wars from the perspective of the colonized, connecting contemporary atrocities into a sequence that tracks back to the colonizing massacres carried out by Pélissier (who asphyxiated an entire tribe at the Dahra caves in 1845) and St. Arnaud (who did the same, also in 1845):

—En 1914, nos pères sont morts pour pourmettre aux tiens alors au berceau de vivre.
Leurs os exilés cherchent une sépulture.
En 1939 nos frères sont morts pour te permettre à toi de pousser.
En 1945 ton père a violé ma mère.
Aujourd’hui, fiston, tu es venu fouiner dans le ventre de ma femme et assassiner mon fils au berceau.
…Tu as fait l’accrochage de Djebel Boukhadra (Ouenza). Cent innocents sont morts « On vous mont comme des automates et on vous lâche sur des populations qui ne vous ont rien fait »*
A Mesloula (Ouenza) des femmes et des enfants réfugiés dans une grotte ont subi une enfumade à la Pélissier.
Vous incendiez nos forêts, vous incendiez nos douars. Saint-Arnaud se réjouit dans sa tombe.

(60, *footnote in the text reads ‘El Moudjahid 1957’)

The charge includes a direct citation from *El Moudjahid* visibly marked by a footnote, as if to accent the judge’s function as mouthpiece of the future state (note that this is the chronology laid out in the dioramas at the Musée du moudjahid beneath the Maqam al-shahid). François Gaspard is a conscientious objector to the war into which he has been conscripted against his will: “Je n’ai tué personne,” he says, “Je refuse cette guerre” (60). Personal goodwill is not the point when history itself is called into a court of justice.

In a sense this is a fictional staging of that trial Fanon complained had not yet—in 1962—taken place. It can be read as an exercise of counter-violence: the maquisard-judge simply corrects that banal colonial arithmetic whereby no number of dead Algerian bodies add up to a single French life before the law. His judgment is swift and without malice. He instructs the condemned Muslim harki to recite the shahada—“Essaie de retrouver ta profession de foi et applique toi à la reciter” (59)—and after sentencing the French conscript declares his sentence just, speaking once again for a collective ‘nous’ in his cavernous voice: “Le juge se leva, tira sur sa moustache et d’une voix caverneuse articula: ‘Nous sommes justes avec nos ennemis’” (61). Behold the act of judgment that founds a new state. The judge’s sentencing performs a theological impulse intrinsic to the violence of the law: he claims to draw a distinction between that violence which is authorized (carried out by representatives of a nation-state in the making) and that which is not (the colonial state whose authority is at stake). The moudjahidin will simply carry out a sentence; this execution is not a crime but an act of arithmetic correction, of making count what did not count under colonial law and thereby founding a new definition of justice. Mechakra’s text keeps open a fissure in the ‘nous’ that the judge’s repetition seems to close, which leaves
ambiguous the matter of authority in a way that makes it difficult to read the tribunal
without wondering: is this sentence just?

Notably, this chapter’s last word belongs not to the tribunal judge (‘nous sommes
justes avec nos ennemis’) but to the narrator, who does not witness the offstage execution—
“Nous entendîmes un cri sauvage” (59)—but describes what happened to the human
remains that she and Kouider found outside the cave the following morning: “Le lendemain,
Kouider et moi fîmes une tournée dans le maquis. A quelques centaines de mètres de la
grotte gisait un homme incomplètement brûlé. Nous l’enterrâmes avec les autres” (62). The
tribunal thus folds into the narrator’s preoccupation with bodies of the war wounded and
dead, and the question of justice is not resolved but left deeply ambiguous at best.

The undated chapter in which this trial appears in fact begins and ends with acts of
burial performed by the narrator. The concluding sentence of the previous chapter suggests
that ‘justice’ is located not with the judge who claims that ‘nous sommes justes avec nos
ennemis’ but rather with those characters who had observed the tribunal from its sidelines:
“Je confiai les futurs cadavres à mes aides, rejoignis Salah et m’endormis du sommeil du
juste” (40). After a blank of white space, the chapter in which the tribunal appears begins as
follows:

Au loin, le ciel et la terre se confondaient; je levai la tête, crachai, me grattai le
cuir chevelu.

…
Une grande tristesse m’habitait.
J’essayais en vain de rêver au soleil, je ne savais plus rêver.
Je revis mes doigts cherchant la balle à l’extraire, le couteau se perdre dans le
cou, le ventre, la poitrine. Je me revis aussi épaulant, visant, tirant à bout portant et
supprimant d’un train une bête vivant. Les animaux n’on pas de tribunal pour porter
plainte.

…
J’étais presque délivrée de mon mal quand je décidai d’aller m’occuper des
cadavres.

(41-42)
This is the narrative ‘I’ who counters the state’s performative establishment of law by caring for the bodies of the dead, including the charred remains of executed enemies. Not only does she speak the appropriate liturgies over the graves of the dead she buries (“Je toussotai et repris mon rôle d’Imam” [44]) in an authoritative yet unauthorized position much like that of an imam and of Antigone—her first-person narration also mediates a multiplicity of singular testimonies in a way that counters the tribunal’s unified ‘nous,’ which infinitely complicates the F.L.N. judge’s definition of postcolonial justice.

Mechakra’s text infinitely multiplies testimonies and speech acts rather than correcting body counts. This particular chapter is an especially intricate text of narrative perspectives mediated and imaginatively inhabited by the narrator’s own ‘I’ as she tends to the bodies of the wounded and dead.13 The tribunal scene is thus surrounded by stories that elude and exceed it, a poetics that exposes the limits of state discourse and that masculine nationalist ‘nous’ in whose name the F.L.N. judge claimed to speak. She tends to the bodies of dying men and imagines the grief of a wife who does not yet know that her husband has been killed: “sa femme s’était déjà promis de donner son prénom à l’enfant qu’il allait naître” (43); she takes a portrait of a woman from a dead husband and imagines herself in that place: “je revis ses yeux puis j’imaginais les miens” (44); she inhabits a mother’s powerful grief for a dead son:

L’un des blessés se vida d’un soupir.
Je m’approchai des victimes de la scie. Ils avaient tous de la fièvre; leur état n’était guère encourageant.
Une mère quelque part priait à genoux, les yeux levés vers le ciel.
Elle ne savait pas que son fils était sur le point de la quitter dans une grotte couvert de neige.
Elle aurait traversé la plaine et la montagne pour venir cueillir le dernier souffle de son enfant qui, avant de mourir, se mit à parler d’elle.
Son coeur avait battu à côté du sien; elle avait rajeuni pour lui permettre de grandir.
Elle aurait traversé la plaine et la montagne pour lui chuchoter une dernière fois des choses qu’elle ne disait qu’à lui et que personne ne connaissait. (39-40)
The narrative opens to include a multitude of others, gesturing even to what of others’ lives might testify even if irreducible to writing or speech. Of her friend Kouider she observes: “son front sillonné de rides, ses larges mains parcourues dans tous les sens de veines turgescentes parlaient pour lui, témoins muets de nombreuses années qui l’enveloppaient” (45). To Salah, the legless orphan who does not know how to write but wishes that he did, she offers comfort: “tu t’y tailleras une flûte, tu y souffleras ta musique; c’est une écriture qui parle. Elle a la force de plusieurs écritures” (46).

Mechakra’s text elaborates and multiplies these foreclosed accounts without capturing or transcribing them, an effect that highlights rather than abstracting or generalizing the incalculable singularity of each life—and that reveals the limited subject of testimony articulated by the F.L.N. judge. The tribunal is literally surrounded by testimonies that not only exceed and escape it but that are excluded from it by the judge’s articulation of a ‘nous’. He speaks for the traumatized collectivity of a future nation, yet the text suggests that the state is founded by this very act of narrative and legal foreclosure. The literary becomes another space for articulating and imagining not a unified collectivity but a multitude of ungeneralizable, singular lives.

Mechakra’s poetics opens gaps, spaces, absences, and silences in the nationalist text of revolution that the Algerian state has long sought to close and control. The word ‘shahid’ cannot appear in her prose because one of the implicit questions raised by Mechakra’s formal juxtapositions is precisely: what is it to count as shuhada, or to be named by this word? If to write or speak the word is to enter into an arithmetic logic of body-counting and selectively inclusive mourning and vengeance as justice, then Mechakra’s sense of tragedy is too insurrectionary to make use of it.
4 | Reading Mechakra After 1999

Juxtaposing Yamina Mechakra’s early novel with a recent text by Assia Djebar clarifies what is at stake in reading Mechakra after the civil war and counter to nationalist discourse and prerogatives; it also helps to set in new relief Mechakra’s early muting of the term ‘shahid.’ Although the Algerian civil war was declared over in 1999, it has not yet become history, nor is it yet finished. The clandestine nature of the massacres, disappearances, and assassinations that took place during that decade made it difficult to determine exactly who was killing whom at the time, producing a widespread effect of opacity and blindness (and pervasive terror) as the war claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people—so many still unaccounted for. The historian Benjamin Stora argues that this historiographic blindspot is largely the effect of state censorship that made visual representation of a ‘war without faces’ impossible as it happened, coupled with strict state control of the national archives and explicit censorship of the press. Amnesty laws passed by President Bouteflika in 1999 formally ended the war by legislating amnesia for mass crimes decreed ‘national tragedy.’ This euphemism suggests that the violence was fundamentally inexplicable, like a natural disaster. It might be better described as a brutal counterterrorist repression that Bouteflika’s regime claims to have decisively won, although it continues in new forms.

Algerians commonly refer to the civil war as as ‘la décennie noire,’ ‘snin al-irhab,’ or simply ‘les années 90’—a ‘black decade’ or ‘years of terror’ during which the state closed national borders and prohibited media coverage of relentless violence waged against civilians by the police and military as a reaction to Islamist groups (GIA, MIA, later AIS) that took up arms against it (and against civilians) after the army deposed president Chadli Benjedid, assumed control of the state, and cancelled democratic elections the FLN had lost to the
Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) in December 1991.\textsuperscript{15} These names for the war at once identify and reinforce the illusion of opacity and unknowability—a form of amnesia and blindness squarely in the current regime’s interest, and that is quite simply dangerous to contest.

It is therefore a consequential mistake to characterize the period as intellectually and aesthetically void. The stunning irruption of new forms of political violence that followed the police repression of 1988 street demonstrations in Algiers also provoked and amplified critical reflection among Algerian intellectuals, especially concerning historiography and memory of the nation’s founding war. As during the war for national independence, much of this new work took on testimony, in both juridical and literary forms, as an activist tool.\textsuperscript{16} Jacques Derrida notes as much in the introduction to his 1998 study \textit{Demeure: Fiction and Testimony}: “I need not call to mind the tragic and geopolitical seriousness of this problem, which, for certain writers, intellectuals and journalists today, becomes a question of life or violent death….those signatories of public speech who exercise this speech either in the context of what we call literary fiction (Rushdie…), or in the context of knowledge, information, or testimony, like all intellectuals in general, scientists, professors, or journalists, some of whom are heroes or heroines of testimony today, for example, in my native Algeria.”\textsuperscript{17} In short, practices of critique and dissent \textit{escalated} rather than diminished during this profoundly violent civil war, and a politics of testimony became again quite urgent. This poses a slightly different geopolitically serious problem, one that remains pressing now: what was the discursive space and aesthetic form for critiques of violence in a state so eager to justify (and to dissimulate) its own force in the name of fighting (Islamist) terror?

In several of her texts published after 1988, Assia Djebar identifies the uncanny repetition of colonizing violence in the structure of the postcolonial state and calls attention
to the circularity of this troubled inheritance. Her 1995 récit *Le blanc de l’Algérie* makes explicit this problem. *Le blanc de l’Algérie* laments the escalating assassination of intellectuals (what Mustapha Benfodil called ‘intélociède’) then underway in Algeria, a place that Djebar—writing from exile in the U.S. during the mid-1990s—describes as “terre du va-et-vient des morts, des dépouilles, des ossements; patrie où l’on ne cesse de négocier des cadavres” (land of the coming-and-going of the dead, of dead bodies, of bones; country where we never stop haggling over cadavers) (LB 265). The title—*Le blanc de L’Algérie*—evokes at once Alger la Blanche, the white haïk worn by algéroises, the fabric of a death shroud, the blankness of an empty page and the void of loss. In response to this murderous effacement, Djebar offers a roll-call of Algeria’s recent dead: she recites names, records details, fills the empty page.


To reconstruct each death scene, Djebar draws on the accounts of eight close friends living in Algiers (listed on p. 250) and cites published torture testimonies, including texts by the poet Anna Gréki (tortured and killed at Barberousse prison in 1958\(^{19}\)), Henri Alleg’s *La Question* (1958), Bachir Hadj Ali’s *L’arbitraire* (1965), and the recent *Cahier noir d’Octobre* (1989), a compilation of testimonies of citizens detained and tortured by state forces during the repression of October 1988. This temporal splicing (1958/1965/1988) forces a question concerning the repetition of state violence and the failure of decolonization, a question of poisoned inheritance that animates *Le blanc de l’Algérie* as its refrain: “Comment, dans Alger, ville noire, s’est opérée la passation entre bourreaux d’hier et ceux d’aujourd’hui?” (How, in
Algiers, dark city, does the hand-off happen between yesterday’s butchers and today’s? (220-221). That is, by what infernal operation did the “gris étincelant des instruments métalliques” (glinting grey of metallic instruments) pass from the hand of the former torturer to the hand of the formerly tortured, from yesterday’s colonial soldier to today’s faceless assassin, whether servant of the state or of God? (LB 216). Le blanc de l’Algérie should be read as both a profound meditation on and critique of violence. Djebar sees the new state replicate rather than redeem the violent injustice of the old, an inheritance she figures as a hand-to-hand transfer of dirty torture instruments. The open question: how to disrupt such a transmission?

This is a question shared by Djebar with many Algerians during the 1990s. In their introduction to the collective document of torture testimonies cited by Djebar—the Cahier noir d’Octobre (1989)—the anonymous members of the Algiers-based Comité National Contre la Torture pose the problem as follows:

Des hommes—des centaines et l’on dit même un millier—ont été arrêtés, battus, suppliciés, torturés, et pour la plupart à jamais meurtris dans leur chair et dans leur mémoire. Cela s’est passé en octobre 1988 lors de ce que la chronique désigne encore une fois par l’euphémisme ‘événements’. Cela s’est déroulé ici, en Algérie. Oui, dans notre pays encore blessé par les exactions du colonialisme et de la guerre, sur cette terre irrémédiablement symbolisée par le mot martyr. Et l’atrocité de ces retournements de l’histoire atteint l’intolérable lorsqu’un un torturé rapport qu’un de ses tortionnaires raconte avoir lui-même subi la ‘gégène’ par l’armée coloniale… Leurs témoignages posent une question, une grave question: Pourquoi en est-on arrivé là?

(Cahier 7, emphasis added)

(Men—hundreds and some even say a thousand—have been arrested, beaten, tormented/executed, tortured, and most of them forever murdered in body and memory. All this happened in October 1988 during what the news once again refers to by the euphemism ‘events’. This unfolded here, in Algeria. Yes, in our country still wounded by the exactions of colonialism and war, on this land irremediably symbolized by the word martyr. The atrocity of these historical repetitions/returnings reaches intolerability when one of the men tortured reports that one of his own torturers described having himself suffered ‘la gegene’ under the colonial army… Their testimonies pose a question, a serious question: Why have we come to this?)
The lawyer-activists who compiled this collection of testimonies clearly know that there are few words more charged in Algerian political discourse than the word ‘shahid’, which they use in its French translation as a metonym for the suffering postcolonized nation as a whole. This use signals the authors’ critical appropriation of the concept and figure of the anticolonial shahid, much as their use of the testimonial form and tropes strategically reactivates anticolonial praxis. They observe that the unhealed wounds inflicted by colonial domination (epitomized by the French technique of torture by electricity, ‘la gégène,’ to which Djamila Boupacha was submitted) are being reopened in a new state-sanctioned bloodletting, and claim that new forms of sacrifice and martyrdom are being exacted at the very hands of previously-tortured martyrs—an excruciating irony and a damning critique of the postcolonial state’s betrayal of the revolutionary aspirations of its shuhada.

One of the four deaths at the cusp of national independence also grieved by Djebar is that of Frantz Fanon, whose analytic lucidity, she notes, might have helped to draw critical distinctions lost in the hallucinatory violence of the Algerian war he did not live to see. In this passage of Le blanc, Djebar proposes that the charged term ‘shahid’ (‘chahid’ in French transliteration) be replaced with another:

Le tribut en cadavres chauds de l’Algérie qui renaît, pantelante, tout en transes, scintellera-t-il dans ce soleil : les chabids ou les choubadas, disait-on, c’est-a-dire littéralement « les martyrs au nom de dieu » ? Pourquoi pas les abtals, héros de la guerre, les volontaires, qui ont offert d’emblée leur vie, leur ardeur, pourquoi déjà cette hyperbole et dans un consensus suspect ? Fanon nous a manqué, pour protester sémantiquement : lui, plus que tout autre, prêt à sortir le scalpel de sa lucidité !

(Djebar LB 111)

(The toll of warm corpses in Algeria that rises again, wheezing, trancelike, will it gleam in this sunlight: the chabids or the choubadas, they are called, that is to say literally ‘martyrs in the name of god’? Why not abtals, war heroes, volunteers who from the start offered their lives, their ardor, why already this hyperbole, and in a dubious consensus? We miss Fanon, for semantic protest: he, more than anyone, ready to take out the scalpel of his lucidity!)
Djebar’s heteroglossic grammar—which doubly pluralizes ‘chahid’ and ‘batal’ by operating French and Arabic conventions at once (‘les chouhadas,’ ‘les abtals’)—clues us to the lexical transformation at play when such words shuttle among French, Arabic(s), English. ‘Batal’ (pl. ‘abtal’) refers to a brave and heroic figure, an athletic champion, a war hero; it is also the Arabic term for the protagonist of a literary narrative or the lead in a theatrical performance. Djebar appears to endorse its secular valence as an act of protest against the theologico-political hyperbole that surrounds the word ‘shahid’ with apparently intransigent religious meanings. By refusing to repeat this word, Djebar makes a break. Her metaphor suggests that such a semantic cut, inspired by Fanon’s lucid scalpel, might lance and drain the infected wound or help to stay the rising toll of warm corpses. Her move to substitute ‘abtal’ for ‘chouhada’ appears to short-circuit the hyperbolic syntax of sanctified sacrifice by rejecting a word wielded as righteously by FLN ideologues as by those of FIS or the GIA (or by those of Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram), yet this very rejection also emphatically confirms and quietly reiterates the reductive translation.

As I have shown, Mechakra considerably mutes the word ‘shahid’ in her text. Like Djebar she wrestles with the question of how to interrupt this dangerous transmission, yet Mechakra works with the inevitable untranslatability of the word not by replacing it but by muting it, by blanking it out, transforming it into an absent presence. This also avoids repeating the bad translation, yet stages a different break with the ‘dubious consensus’ to which ‘shahid’ only appears to belong. Two changes to the most recent (2000) edition of *La grotte éclatée* visibly accent Mechakra abiding preoccupations with tragedy and testimony, preoccupations that take on newly dissident valences after the 1990s and that bring this aesthetic strategy of silent protection (a kind of burial?) into new light for readers in a new time of war.
The 2000 edition of La grotte éclatée bears on its cover a small print of Algerian modernist M’Hamed Issiakhem’s painting Les Aveugles (“The Blind”), completed in 1982 and now displayed in the Musée national des beaux arts in Algiers; on this painting is hand-printed an unsigned verse from Kateb Yacine’s tragedy Les ancêtres rédoublent de féroce, staged just once in Paris in 1967. Included as a new prefatory text to this edition of the novel—placed before Kateb Yacine’s allographic preface—is an untitled note signed Yamina MECHAKRA. The note suggests that Mechakra made these two additions herself, reframing her war novel for readers in this time of so-called ‘national tragedy.’

By highlighting the relationship of her fiction to work by Issiakhem and Kateb—best friends with each other, and close friends of hers—Mechakra highlights her novel’s tragic register, as if is has become urgent to caution readers not to mistake this text for nationalist romance. Issiakhem’s monochromatic oil painting resembles the color and texture of stone, evoking the intricate petroglyphs found throughout the Sahara and in the Aurès mountain caves that are the setting (and title) of Mechakra’s narrative. In Issiakhem’s enigmatic vision, two human figures appear suspended; they face in the same direction, to the right—a future space for a French-reader, a past for a reader of Arabic, even as this visual text refrains from entering the fraught politics of language in postcolonized Algeria. The taller figure holds a dim lantern. A pale specter seems to follow them—or to pull them—from the left, its arm raised, its shroud falling at their backs. It is a haunting image; its title and the ambiguous relations among these figures invite reflection on problems of blindness and transmission, a visual accent on the text’s thematic and formal obsessions.

In her prefatory note, Mechakra does not decipher the visual-verbal texts she draws together but rather narrates two scenes that also call upon readers to confront a predicament of untransmissible testimony. The scenes are dated 1980 and 1981—just after La grotte
éclatée’s first publication (1979), just before Issiakhem painted Les aveugles (1982), a few years before Issiakhem’s death (1985) and several before Kateb’s (1989). In these scenes, Mechakra eavesdrops on private conversations between her two friends in the foyer of Kateb’s family home in Ben Aknoun. She claims to remember their whispered exchanges and to have recorded them in a notebook, but offers only a partial transcript of interrupted sentence fragments and a promise: “Un jour viendra où j’écrirais ce témoignage resté intact.” This withholding and secretive gesture might be read as a form of protection that shields testimony for an unspecified future, and as an act of hope that a future will come in which such testimony might be readable and meaningful. This paratextual gesture reframes La grotte éclatée for contemporary and future reading.

The year that Mechakra composed this note and promise—1999—is the same year that President Bouteflika proposed the first of two series of amnesty laws in the name of ‘Civil Harmony’ and ‘peace and national reconciliation’ to legislate impunity by presidential decree for the widespread terror that his regime claimed to have decisively ended, yet in which it was surely complicit. In 1999, under the imperative of ‘la tragédie nationale’ Bouteflika decreed amnesty for the armed forces and state-armed militias that had operated during that dark decade. These laws created conditions of narrative and juridical impasse that continue to make it very difficult for survivors and scholars to gain clarity concerning the violence of that very recent past. Mechakra’s secretive opening gesture—her promise of a future testimony left unwritten and protected—is marked by this moment, and invites us to read La grotte éclatée as a prophetic and dissident text. This is precisely as Kateb Yacine suggested in his 1973 preface, in which he directly associates Mechakra with the legendary figure of the Kahina:

Ce n’est pas pour rien que les partisans de la Kahina et les maquisards du Premier Novembre sont passés par les mêmes grottes, de l’Aurès à la Tunisie. De son vrai
nom Dihya, la Kahina n’est plus connue que par son nom de guerre. Kahina, en arabe, signifie prophétesse. Elle avait, d’après ses ennemis, le don de la parole. Au commencement était le verbe. Les enfants de la Kahina ne doivent plus ignorer qu’une femme inspirée fut jadis à la tête d’une patrie immense qui couvre toute l’Afrique du Nord. Cela donne une certaine vertige à ceux qui voient dans le passé le spectre de l’avenir.

(8)

Unlike her friends, Mechakra lived to see the 1990s, alone in a small house on the grounds of Drid Hocine Psychiatric Hospital in Algiers. At Drid Hocine, Mechakra both practiced as a psychiatrist and was discreetly treated for what her mentor (and present chief of psychiatry at the hospital) Mohamed Tedjiza has informally diagnosed as schizophrenia. Mechakra surely felt the pervasive violence that rocked Algiers during that decade, although nowhere—at least not in print—did she document her experience of the civil war. When she made these additions to La grotte éclatée Mechakra had just published her second novel Arris (in 1999) after years struggling to write while grappling with the increasingly acute symptoms (paranoia, hallucinations) of her illness. Arris is a surreal text whose deracinated protagonist inhabits no recognizable nation, although the novel begins in a place that might be a remote village in the Aurès. In no way can this strange text be said to be ‘about’ the Algerian civil war in any thematic or representational sense, yet Mechakra wrote it during that time and titled it with the same proper name at the heart of La grotte éclatée. Perhaps a trace of Mechakra’s own disillusioned and tormented insight might be deciphered in Arris’s rather dizzying nonsequiturs: “Je croyais aux héros. Aujourd’hui, je sais. Il n’y a pas de héros qui ne soit martyr. Chacun de nous l’est à sa manière. Esclave ou libre” (55). It is as if, after 1999, Arris answers the moudjahida narrator of La grotte éclatée and offers a counterpoint to Djebar’s substitution: ‘I believed in heroes. Today, I know. There is no hero who is not a martyr. Every one of us is one in our own way. Slave or free.’
Mechakra and Djebar wrote their texts (Arris; the preface to La grotte éclatée; Le blanc de l’Algérie) while grieving the same deaths—not in general, but quite specifically. Djebar dedicated Le blanc de l’Algérie to the memory of three assassinated friends. The first name she lists on the dedication page is that of Dr. Mahfoud Boucebci, a human rights activist often called the ‘father of Algerian psychiatry’ who was director of psychiatry at Drid Hocine Hospital beginning in 1985. Dr. Boucebci was stabbed to death at the hospital’s gate on 15 June 1993—the very morning after he had founded a committee to investigate the truth about the assassination of novelist and journalist Tahar Djaout, who had been attacked by assassins and died from his wounds a few weeks before. Who exactly is responsible for killing Tahar Djaout is still unknown—it has been suggested but not proved that state security forces and not the (accused) Groupe Islamique Armée are in fact behind Djaout’s murder (fn Livre noir for a clear discussion of this). Dr. Boucebci was also Yamina Mechakra’s direct supervisor at Drid Hocine. His assassination took place almost literally on her doorstep. The identity of Boucebci’s murderers also remains unknown. Anouar Haddam, spokesperson for the FIS then living in exile in the United States, called Boucebci’s killing “the execution of a sentence and not a crime. It is a sentence carried out by the moudjahidin.”

Statements (and sentencings) like Anouar Haddam’s make clear the stakes of semantic distinctions that authorize which executions count as crimes to whom in contemporary Algeria—and which deaths do not count at all. La grotte éclatée must be read now with these distinctions, sentencings, and obcurities in mind. In 1999, Mechakra reframed her 1979 revolutionary war novel to be read at a time when open critique (and fiction writing) invited assassination, and when writers and psychiatrists in her immediate circle were targets for execution at the hands of new ‘moudjahidin’ claiming to represent a
new law in open conflict with the state’s, and at a time when state security forces committed widespread if dissimulated (and disavowed) acts of violence against civilians in the name of fighting Islamist terror. She reaccents her war novel’s fixation on suffering and blindness at precisely the moment that Bouteflika legislated that certain events, names, and disappearances of that war could not be publicly named, grieved, or seen. She offers a promise of future testimony just as the state foreclosed juridical process and legally instituted forgetting and blindness. Her experiment with testimony carves a rare discursive space—such space was and remains so difficult to claim, and not just in Algeria—to critique and contest both the violence of religious ideologues and of the state. Mechakra’s text protects the idea of justice by preserving the possibility to imagine justice beyond the purview of that law.

1 James McDougall writes: “The official history of the revolution is that of a glorious epic in which only extremes of purity and corruption are possible, in which “men were snatched from their mediocrity to become the “sublimer heroes” or the “absolute traitors” of the unfolding tragedy’. For Algerian historian Mahfoud Kaddache, 1 November was ‘the beginning of a new and glorious page in the history of Algeria’. The constitution of 1976 asserted in its opening paragraphs that the war of national liberation ‘will remain in history as one of the great epics marking the resurrection of the peoples of the Third World’ and that ‘Algeria today holds a place of the first order in the international arena thanks to the worldwide influence of the Revolution of 1 November 1954’. It further asserts ‘the continuity and reaffirmation of the noble ideals which have animated from its beginnings the great Revolution of 1 November 1954’. As the origin point of reference for the independent state, its supplier of legitimacy and principal symbolic resource, the revolutionary epic was instituted at the very center of Algeria’s political imaginary, the founding aporia of the nation’s forgetful memory.” (124)

2 Which begins: “Allāhu akbar, Ash-hadu an-lā ilāha illā allāh, Ash-hadu anna Muhammadan-Rasul allāh…”

3 That the Maqam al-shahid’s direct association of ‘shahid’ with sacrifice and martyrdom colludes with the usual translation of the word in European-language media and scholarship is not incidental, nor is the fact that this word is now inevitably associated with Islamist violence in general and suicide bombers in particular. The Arabic word has entered the
Oxford English Dictionary—that is to say shahid is now naturalized as an English word—which defines it unequivocally as ‘Muslim martyr’ based on cases of use in British-colonized South Asia beginning in 1881 (‘the Musalman name shahid’; ‘The martyrs of the new Indian religion, known by the Musalman name shahid, were to have their own exceeding great reward in a future state’) and on entries from the 1934 Encyclopedia of Islam (‘the Muslim who falls on the battlefield is called Shahid, ‘witness,’ ‘martyr’).

4 McDougall: ‘...the figure of the mujahid, marching victoriously under the national flag across the frontier at independence, is the obverse image of the ‘one and a half million martyrs’ which the war is routinely said to have cost Algeria. The dead, both the civilian victims of colonialism and the actively fighting martyrs fallen ‘on the field of honor’ in the maquis, are perhaps the strongest of all postwar national symbols. Beyond the structural symbolic complementarity of these aspects of Algeria’s social memory, however, there remains a certain malaise, an unspoken recognition of the horrific tragedy of the war’ (126).

5 Alcaraz notes that what is now called ‘Le musée national du moudjahid’ was initially called the ‘Musée du jihad’, and it was to be housed in the former Serkadji/Barberousse prison but moved to the Maqam al-shahid in 198? and renamed in 1993 (the slightly less provocative ‘moudjahid’ chosen to replace ‘jihad,’ though they share the same root the valences are different, especially in the 1990s).

6 Alcaraz details these omissions—for example, nowhere does Messali Hadj appear, or any acknowledgement that detracts from the myth of total national unity; no mention of the UDMA or the PCA: “Le mythe de l’unanimité du peuple algérien permet ainsi d’effacer le pluralisme du mouvement national” (42).

7 Malika Rahal (asking, ‘Is a history of modern Algeria possible?’) describes how the teleological national epic produced and endorsed by the FLN leadership under Boumédienne was widely disseminated during the 1970s, when the state’s near-total monopoly on academic, educational, and popular publishing and over the national archives ensured that textbooks, scholarship, and pedagogies alike “reflected the dominant narrative: certain themes, figures, or organizations were simply written out” and thereby “directly influenced the material available to historians and determined the questions they could—or could not—ask” (125). This set the epistemological and juridical scene for all that would appear to vanish into the void of ‘national tragedy’ during the 1990s, a period that was not so much an inexplicable storm of Islamist terror (as it is usually represented) but rather a calculated production of absence carried out by state policy and security forces.

8 The text charts a nominal topography through its incantation of proper names that suggests not nationalist introversion but a differently constellated spatial and temporal extroversion. This Al-Dzjair of multiple capitals beyond Alger (Numidie, Tingi, Cirta, Carthage, Dougga, Tunis, Tanger, Cairo, Setif, Guelma, Arris) and singular landscapes (the Fezzan desert, the Méskiana plain, the Kabylie, the precipitous gorges of Constantine, the
In these names inhere histories of conquest and resistance anterior to French colonization (Kahina, Dido, Tacfarinas, then Abdelkader). The names articulate lateral links (Dien Bien Phu, Wang, N’Boma, ‘la squaw exterminee’); they index archives kept alive by Saharan and sub-Saharan discursive networks (‘la legende noir,’ ‘la legende de Djazia’, ‘la legende de Louldja’). This capacious imaginary map renders the novel form and the French language of La grotte éclatée not untranslatable, but unfamiliiar—misfit, illegible, off the radar for French readers. She also lays claim to Greek tragedy, to Césaire, to Augustine, to the legend of the Berber warrior-queen Kahena, to the oral archive of Chaoui and Mozabite songs and stories to which she refers as ‘oralité ancestrale.’

Mechakra herself was an obscure recluse, little known beyond a small circle of close friends and committed readers. Despite renewed public interest in Mechakra since her death after painful physical and mental illness in May 2013 (including editorials and obituaries in the Algerian press and the Fondation Yamina Mechakra established in 2014 to support scholarly study of her oeuvre), Mechakra’s few texts remain relatively difficult to find even in Algiers, where they were published and where she lived for most of her life. Her only published short fiction, ‘L’eveil du mont,’ can be tracked down in a 1976 back-issue of El-Moudjahid Culturel. Her second and last novel Arris is available in a 1999 Marsa edition produced by the journal Algérie Littérature/Action, dedicated since 1996 to promoting unpublished work by emerging Algerian writers.


The section concludes by opening up even more white space on the page. This might be line justification, but given the ample white space throughout the novel it seems more deliberate—in any case it is a kind of readable absence, and it creates a sense of glitchiness.

Puis mes craintes et mes angoisses se turent.

J’avais cueilli des fleurs et j’avais fleuri notre chambre.

Ce soir-là m’avait semblé plus gai. C’était une illusion.

L’essentiel était que j’y aie cru un instant.

Mechakra’s earlier text ‘L’eveil du mont’ makes explicit reference to Greek myth, a repurposed proper name. Three years before publishing La grotte éclatée Mechakra published a short piece of fiction in El-Moudjahid, and this piece reads as if it might have been written
as a section of the later novel. It tracks two processions: a group of mourners who trek together to a funeral site in the Aures, and a line of colonial army deserters. The text is also dated: 1 November, 1954—the official date of the armed revolution’s start, accenting Mechakra’s tragic rather than epic take on the revolution. The theme of this piece is also maternal grief and the precarity of poverty; mothers walk napalmed roads on a grief pilgrimage in an apocalyptic warscape: “Les os exilés des enfants de Dalia cherchaient une sépulture.” A dog who follows the group is named, notably, Cerbère—that name of the Greek mythological dog who guards the gates of the underworld to prevent the living from entering and the dead from escaping.

13 L’un des blessés se vida d’un soupir. Je m’approchai des victimes de la scie. Ils avaient tous de la fièvre; leur état n’était guère encourageant. Une mère quelque part priait à genoux, les yeux levés vers le ciel. Elle ne savait pas que son fils était sur le point de la quitter dans une grotte couvert de neige. Elle aurait traversé la plaine et la montagne pour venir cueillir le dernier souffle de son enfant qui, avant de mourir, se mit à parler d’elle. Son cœur avait battu à côté du sien; elle avait rajeuni pour lui permettre de grandir. Elle aurait traversé la plaine et la montagne pour lui chuchoter une dernière fois des choses qu’elle ne disait qu’à lui et que personne ne connaissait. (39-40)

14 From r-h-b, to be frightened, alarmed, intimidated, to dread; also reverence, respect, veneration. A terrorist: ‘irhabi’.

15 January 1992 coup d’état—more specifically, the army took over the state, deposed Chadli Benjedid; Boudiaf became president and was assassinated in 1992. [Name some good sources on the history of the war, perhaps Stora’s.]

16 See Algérie, le livre noir (1998), a text compiled after a collaborative report by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l’homme, and Reporters sans frontières in response to a proposal from Editions la Découverte. Its preface: “Nos organisations considèrent que, pour trouver une solution à cette tragédie, il est nécessaire que l’enquête soit menée et que toute la lumière soit faite. À cette fin, nous avons demandé l’ouverture d’une enquête internationale visant à établir les faits, examiner les prétendues responsabilités, et formuler des recommandations concernant les massacres et autres abus commis par toutes les parties en conflit. Nous avons préconisé que cette enquête dispose de pouvoirs importants et des ressources humaines et matérielles nécessaires, et qu’elle soit notamment chargée de rassembler des preuves et de témoignages, y compris de la part de victimes, de témoins et de responsables officiels, afin de découvrir la vérité. (6-7)

17 As Derrida comments in Demeure: Fiction and Testimony: “I need not call to mind the tragic and geopolitical seriousness of this problem, which, for certain writers, intellectuals and journalists today, becomes a question of life or violent death. This will also be the horizon of this presentation. I cite these three categories (writers, intellectuals, and journalists) as we do
in the International Parliament of Writers, in order to associate in a way that is certainly problematic, but as victims of the same murderous persecution, those signatories of public speech who exercise this speech either in the context of what we call literary fiction (Rushdie...), or in the context of knowledge, information, or testimony, like all intellectuals in general, scientists, professors, or journalists, some of who are heroes or heroines of testimony today, for example, in my native Algeria. Perhaps it is decent and urgent today, under the title Passions of Literature, to begin by saluting those who risk their lives, those who, driven by a certain unconditional imperative of literature and testimony, find themselves exposed to assassins because of this—to murderers whose very crime cannot be determined without taking into account a certain uncomprehending inability to tolerate literature and testimony, as well as their common law. Literature and death, truth and death: this is the subject…” (22)

18 Djaout’s assassination, which I discuss later in this chapter and especially in the next chapter, was claimed by the GIA, al-Jama’ab al-Islamiyah al-Musallaha, acronym from the French Groupe Islamique Armée.

19 The Algiers prison where Djamila Boupacha was tortured in 1959; it was renamed Serkadji under Boumédienn. Throughout the 1990s it was the high-security prison in Algiers, located above the Casbah. In 1995, about two-thirds of detainees in Serkadji had been accused or convicted of terrorism. This is where the Musée du moudjahid, now beneath the Maqam al-shahid, was originally supposed to be housed! Much more recently: “Le ministre de la Justice, garde des sceaux, Tayeb Louh, avait annoncé que la prison sera fermée définitivement en 2014 et qui sera ensuite transformée en musée de la mémoire nationale. « Il s’agit là d’un objectif stratégique, lié à la mémoire nationale et à l’histoire de l’Algérie, qui nécessite que les autorités publiques mettent tout en œuvre, en vue de sa transformation en un musée, dans les plus brefs délais » a-t-il déclaré, le ministre à ajouté que « cette décision obéit un peu aux demandes quotidiennes émanant de la part de réalisateurs et cinéastes pour faire des prises de vue, ou filmer au niveau de la prison de Serkadji. »” (from Communiqué de Algérie Presse Service (APS), du 25 décembre 2013)

20 Here it is worth revisiting Stora’s argument about the problematic construction and rhetorical uses of this notion of historical repetition, in Algérie années 90.

21 The formal resonances and repetitions among these testimonial texts are multiple, some rhetorically strategic and others not obviously so. Le cahier noir: “Créé sous le chos des premiers témoignages le 17 octobre 1988, il s’est fixé deux objectifs : Abolition de la torture. Jugement des tortionnaires conformément à la constitution et à la loi. Les dizaines de milliers de pétitionnaires, plus de 10,000 manifestants lors de la marche contre la torture à Bab-Ezzouar, la préparation d’un ‘procès symbolique de la torture’ qui a permis un grand rassemblement populaire devant la salle Harcha malgré son interdiction, des prises de position multiples de divers forces et courants ont montre que NOTRE SOCIÉTÉ ÉXIGE QUE SOIT BANNIE LA GANGRÈNE.” (11)

22 The other three of these four deaths named by Djebar are those of Albert Camus (car accident, 1960), Mouloud Feraoun (murdered by the O.A.S., 1962), and Jean Amrouche
cancer, 1962). Djebar refers to these “quatre annonciateurs” (112) as the “abtals de la littérature algérienne” (112). She glosses the Arabic term ‘batal’ (pl. ‘abtal’) as war hero (111), yet notably the term is also used to name the narrator of a literary text. Given the articulation of literature and politics in 20th century Algeria this ambiguity seems especially appropriate.

In an especially moving section of Le blanc de l’Algérie, Djebar narrates the suicide of Josie Fanon in 1989—just after the repression of October 1988 and at the onset of the civil war—and suggests that the dawning devastation of this new war had something to do with Josie Fanon’s decision to end her life by leaping from a window in El-Biar.

Mechakra’s new prefatory note begins by citing an unattributed verse that is hand-printed at the lower edge of Issiakhem’s painting, enclosed by ellipses that mark it as an excerpt. This reads:

…Nous qui vivons au passé
Nous la plus forte des multitudes
Notre nombre s’accroit sans cesse
et nous attendons du renfort…

Mechakra’s footnote does not specify a source, only that she transcribed this verse from Issiakhem’s canvas. Her next sentence questions its authorship: “Ce poème sur le tableau ‘Les aveugles’ de M’hamed Issiakhem a-t-il été écrit par lui, par Kateb YACINE ou par quelqu’un d’autre.” There is no question mark, and Mechakra does not answer her question. Did she recognize the lines from Kateb Yacine’s tragedy Les ancêtres rédoublent de féroceïté, staged just once in Paris in 1967? Did she know that Kateb had written text on other paintings by Issiakhem? Mechakra’s act of intertextual filiation clearly positions her novel in an Algerian modernist aesthetic tradition—after Nedjma, the anticolonial war novel is a canonical and revered genre in postcolonial Algeria, while Kateb and Issiakhem are exemplary dissident figures whose legible traces Mechakra deliberately weaves through La grotte éclatée’s imagery and form.

Kateb and Issiakhem are both artists celebrated for their keen sensitivity to suffering, and Les ancêtres rédoublent de féroceïté was controversial theater in 1967 precisely because it staged the problem of political violence in the new Algerian state by presenting revolutionary scenes in tragic rather than epic or romantic form. Produced five years after the Algerian state was founded, just as Bounédienne secured power after deposing Ben Bella and outlawing the Algerian Communist Party (PCA), this play could likely not have been staged in Algiers. The lines cited by Issiakhem in 1982 and by Mechakra in 2000 were first spoken in 1967 on a Paris stage by a dead character reincarnated as a mythic Vulture to watch over his ancestral Keblouti tribe. It is an anticipatory call for the vengeful bloodletting that would bring still more of the living to join the multitudes of dead. Positioned by Mechakra as an epigraph to the 2000 edition of La grotte éclatée, the verse no longer reads as anticipatory but rather as a grim prophecy fulfilled, and Kateb’s observation assumes darker valences: ‘cela donne une certaine vertige à ceux qui voient dans le passé le spectre de l’avenir.’
26 That is, amnesty for widespread repression, torture, disappearance, and massacre committed by both the armed Islamic groups and the military/police. Under the euphemistic sign of ‘la tragédie nationale’ Bouteflika oversaw two sets of amnesty measures: the Civil Harmony Law put to referendum in 1999 (using article 41 of this law, Bouteflika passed a presidential decree in 2000 granting amnesty to members of the AIS and th LIDD) and the “Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation” proposed by the president in 2005, put to referendum, and quickly approved by the cabinet in 2006 before it could be debated by parliament, which was out of session. This ‘reconciliation’ charter issued blanket amnesty for the armed forces and state-armed militias that had operated during the 1990s, a move that was denounced by international human rights organizations such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch.

27 From Karima Bennoune’s article, “Algeria Twenty Years On: Words do not die”: “Back in 1993, thirteen days after Djaout’s passing, one of Africa’s leading psychiatrists, the erudite Dr. Mahfoud Boucebei, another figure in a potential “democratic alternative,” was in the sights of obscurantist assassins. On the morning of Tuesday June 15, 1993, the 57 year-old vice president of the International Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry was knifed at the entrance to his Algiers hospital. Boucebei had written pioneering works about single mothers, and won the Maghreb Prize for Medicine. In a 1991 interview, he described the fundamentalist takeover of Mustapha Hospital in Algiers. “I felt infinite pain in seeing these young men who thought they were all powerful and had suddenly become superchiefs, and could command and humiliate a doctor.” Anouar Haddam, the loathsome spokesman of Algeria’s Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) who found refuge in the United States, said that Boucebsi’s killing was “not a crime but the execution of a sentence.”

https://opendemocracy.net/5050/karima-bennoune/algeria-twenty-years-on-words-do-not-die

28 In an interview quoted by the AFP (global news agency) and cited in the 1994 Human Rights Watch World Report, Algeria section. See: http://www.wluml.org/node/2543 and also http://www.refworld.org/docid/467fca9432.html
CHAPTER FOUR

LINES OF FLIGHT:
One Thousand Nights for a Dark Decade

Je suis comme l’aigle blessé
L’aigle blessé entre les ailes
Tous ses enfants se sont envolé
Et lui ne cess de pleurer…

—Fadhma Aït Mansour Amrouche,
_Histoire de ma vie_, 213

1

Waciny Laredj’s 1993 novel _Sayyidatu l-maqâm: marthiyât al-yawm al-haţīn_ does not just thematize or chronicle Algeria’s violent _décennie noire_, nor is it—as the back cover of its 2009 French translation asks us to believe—a “récit d’un destin brisé par le fanatisme religieux.” On the one hand, this text is _not_ a récit but a fiction, an obvious yet apparently often-forgotten distinction frequently underscored by Laredj himself in a somewhat defensive tone.1 On the other hand, the violence that structures and disrupts this text is not obviously (or at least not unambiguously) that practiced by Islamists waging war against the Algerian state or secular modernity.

In 1993, the year that Laredj first published _Sayyidatu l- maqâm_, death was indeed everywhere in and around Algiers. In June 1993, novelist and journalist Tahar Djaout became the first of scores of Algerian writers assassinated in the city. While Djaout’s murder was publicly claimed by the GIA, evidence suggests that agents of the state carried out then framed this killing2—a case emblematic of the way in which state-sanctioned violence is
conveniently obfuscated by the current regime’s triumphal discourse concerning its ‘war on terror.’ Such knowledge permits us to decipher the working of official fiction in this excerpt from the letter of condolence sent by a spokesperson of the Algerian government to the family of Tahar Djaout on 3 June 1993: “Le crime dont a été victime Tahar Djaout ne restera pas impuni. Il ne fera que renforces la détermination du gouvernement à poursuivre inébranlablement son action visant à l’éradication du terrorisme et à la restauration de la paix civile” (17). It is just as the doomed protagonist of Laredj’s novel exclaims: “Un cauchemar, bien sûr! Mais la réalité que nous vivons dépasse la fiction” (49). Reality is more nightmarish than fiction.

Into the ambiguous (illegal, dangerous) discursive space beyond such state fiction perhaps only a literary text can venture. This is why Laredj’s text must be read as something more than a “récit d’un destin brisé par le fanatisme religieux.” Although Laredj has publicly described Sayyidatu l-maqâm as an act of artistic resistance against Islamist violence, the novel is also a more radical and more risky curse that flies in the face of the state. Criticising Islamist extremists is easy. Questioning the reasons of state security is not. Laredj’s text opens space to do both at once, although readers of the text—as well as its author—have tended to deemphasize this.

*Sayyidatu l-maqâm* was first published not in Algiers but by the Cologne-and-Beirut-based publisher Dar Al-Jamal in 1993, after publishers in Algeria refused it and the Lebanon-based Dar Al-Adab retracted the manuscript at the last minute in fear of violent retaliation.³ Laredj’s novel was subsequently published in Algiers in 1997, then translated to French by Marcel Bois (in collaboration with Laredj, as the cover note highlights; they are close friends, as I will discuss) and published as *Les ailes de la reine* in 2009 (Sindbad/Actes Sud, France).
Today, only the imported French translation is available in Algiers bookshops. Here is a fuller excerpt from its back cover:

Récit d’un destin brisé par le fanatisme religieux, *Les ailes de la reine* est aussi, et peut-être surtout, une leçon de courage. Celui des hommes et des femmes qui savent, comme Miryam—et qui en tirent toutes les conséquences, au péril de leur vie—que la culture est le dernier rempart contre la barbarie.

The story of a fate broken by religious fanaticism, *Les ailes de la reine* is also, and perhaps above all, a lesson in courage. That of men and women who know, like Miryam—and who take from it all consequences, at the risk of their lives—that culture is the last defense against barbarism.

This should sound familiar, especially as this interpretation of 1990s Algeria is now a fixture in international debates concerning contemporary acts of terror. Counter to what official (and popular) rhetorics of terror might have us believe, the 1990s civil war was not a case of barbarous religious fanatics attacking modern culture and republican values. To depict the ‘decennie noire’ as an Islamist assault on civilization or a savage attack the democratic and egalitarian character of Francophonie is to repress the very ambiguity—that is the indistinction between terror condoned and condemned by the state—that Laredj’s novel renders perceptible, an ambiguity that must be held open to disrupt the ongoing rhetorics of terror that justify new forms of imperial war. Let us be clear: the deeply uncivil war called ‘the dark decade’ was characterized by pervasive violence on the part of terrorist groups and state and military forces, such that it was (and remains, due to the amnesty laws decreed by Bouteflika in the name of ‘national reconciliation’ during the late 1990s and early 2000s) unclear exactly who was torturing and killing whom. The decade lasted more than ten years, although the Bouteflika regime staked its legitimacy to the claim that it had triumphed over the terrorists and ended war after 1999. Because it is in the current regime’s interest that much of what happened during the years after October 1988 never come to light, to ascribe
responsibility for the violence to ‘religious fanatics’ waging their ‘barbarous’ jihad against ‘culture’ plays directly into official discourse in a dangerous way.

Highlighting rather than surpressing this unsettling indistinction produces not only a much different reading of this novel but also articulates—with it—a crucial shift in the concept of ‘terror’ that flies in the face of state-sanctioned anti-terror discourse. Laredj’s novel stakes a translational claim to Arabic that does a powerful work on monolingual nationalist violence.

2 |

The novel chronicles a single death as portent of disaster to come. The ‘sayyida’ (young woman, lady) named by the title is surely its tragic heroine: “Miryam, la rose et le rêve de cette cité!” (11). The Arabic subtitle—marthiyāt al-yawm al-ḥaẓīn—translates to “elegies of the sad day”, which deemphasizes the political to invite reading the text as elegy for a personal tragedy (a single grievous day). Miryam is a professional ballet dancer whose only desire is to dance Rimsky-Korsakov’s Shahrazad at the National Theatre (TNA) before it is shuttered, yet she dies literally midflight: dancing dislocates a stray bullet that had lodged in her brain during the street demonstrations that rocked Algiers in October 1988. The novel’s Arabic title tethers the text and its tragic heroine to the city and its symbol, to that city, and to its fate. Sayyidatu l-maqām most directly translates to something like ‘the lady of the maqam.’ When I spoke with translator Marcel Bois about this title, his first response was to say—as if this might stand in as translation—“Sayyidatu l-maqam,’ you know, as in the ‘maqam l-shahid.’”

This is an immediate association quickly drawn by any reader familiar with Algiers. It is difficult to see this title and not associate it with that national monument, and to thus
implicitly tie Miryam to the landscape of the capital city. We learn that the character Miryam is the daughter of a shahid, and that the state’s pension for families of the war martyrs funds her early ballet lessons. Because of an orthographic affinity between the Arabic words, it is fairly easy to misread the title not as sayidat al-maqam but as ‘shahidat al-maqam.’ As Miryam is martyred from page one—we know her inevitable end from the start—the reader is invited to imagine this tragic ‘sayyida’ as a ‘shahida’ for a new time, sacrificial victim of a national tragedy. Her tragic fall portends the city’s. The novel opens with this sentence: “En cette ville, un immense fracas, une chute vertigineuse!” (11).

What is immediately striking is the way that the French translation transforms an untranslatable Arabic title. While the Arabic tethers her to the capital Algiers, the French translation gives her wings. The images on the respective covers of the Arabic and French versions of the text underscore this emphasis on flight. According to both Laredj and Bois, the French editors chose the new title because they liked its touch of grace and hope—*the wings of the queen*—in the face of ‘intégrisme islamiste.’ As Marcel Bois told me, Miryam is in a sense a creature whose wings have been broken, so it’s an okay title. He and Laredj, with the French editors, had considered others: *Le sang de la vierge* (too aggressive); *La nuit du viol* (too dark); *La dame du sanctuaire* (the most literal). Yet, as Bois pointed out, a *maqam* is both a sanctuary—a space between heaven and earth—and a dance hall. It has no French equivalent, although *sanctuaire* isn’t bad. The original title (sayyida) also calls up an image of the kind of Algéroise who would be called (as Laredj points out in an interview) ‘lallahouma’ in dialectical Arabic, of which the formal Arabic is a fairly direct translation: a lady of this place, or this neighborhood. One known and admired, one who is above reproach and incomparable.5 One in this case suspended in a dance between heaven and earth: she carries a bullet in her brain and is threatened by the new Inquisiteurs who wish to shut down the
theater. Hers is a double bind: a space of unlivable suspension, and yet she chooses not to stop dancing. The narrative unfolds in the face of inevitable death and devastation; that is its energy, its narrative principle—giving the title the added valence of association with the 1001 Nights.

The French translation concludes as Laredj could not have in 1991, with this signature: “Algiers, the capital, winter/spring 1991.” The specification ‘the capital’ is necessary in Arabic because the proper name of the nation and of its capital city are the same word, al-jazair. Eighteen years later, the French signature inscribes knowledge of a violent history that at the time of writing (winter 1991) was yet-to-come. The winter of 1991 is a striking and strange date by which to mark such a novel, as it was the cusp of war before all hell broke loose. The date falls months before the parliamentary election and military coup that cancelled it. It is before the FIS and its armed wing the GIA went full force against the state, and before the campaign of targeted assassinations and mass killings. Laredj could not see in 1991 what was to come, and yet it is as if he saw; Sayyidatu l-maqām is a vertiginous and visionary text. What if we consider that temporal space between 1991 and 2009 without closing it, leaving open a space of translation and suspension? What if we resist the impulse to read the text retrospectively through the filter of horrors that came after, to focus on a moment just before the state’s escalation of war against civilians? This permits a reading that isn’t oversaturated with the discourse of anti-terror; it also redirects critical focus to the violence of the state and the madness of the law.

So we know Miryam’s fate from the first sentences, and can sense others coming. Laredj’s novel is set in Algiers and framed by a single day. It is a kind of contemporary rihla,
or travel narrative, whose first-person narrator (and bereft lover of the doomed ballerina) winds his way through the Algiers streets on the dark night after Miryam’s death, a night which it turns out is also his last. The time is the immediate aftermath of the demonstrations of October 1988, a date that frequently punctuates the text from its opening lines. This—‘Octobre noir’—is when police violence against protestors stunned the Algerian public and precipitated events that led to state’s war against—or so it claimed—Islamist groups that had taken up arms against it and against civilians after the cancelled parliamentary elections and coup d’etat of 1991. Crucially: the bullet in Miryam’s brain got there when she was shot by an unknown gunman as she knelt to shield a wounded person on the street on October 7 1988. The narrative unfolds in in the aftermath of that date, that moment, culminating in a single dark night as the narrator winds inexorable way through the Algiers streets to his own suicide.

We are informed of Miryam’s end from the start, and we have enough clues to know that his coming. This despairing circumambulation of Algiers culminates with the narrator’s leap from the Telemly Bridge, so the novel ends with his body in midflight, a dramatic suspension and deferral of what we readers imagine must be his imminent death. We detect annihilation close at hand—and through these characters of the city itself, an imminent apocalypse figured alternately as desertification, as infection, as earthquake, and as a descent into desolate abyss: “Notre ville a perdu son envie de faire la fête, elle s’est habituée à une misère qui n’en finit pas. Les vents violents soufflent de plus en plus fort dans la nuit angoissante où l’on n’entend plus que les grincements, les gémissements des fils électriques à travers cet immense vide que l’on appelle la ville” (19) [Our city has lost her desire to celebrate, she has become habituated to unending misery. Violent winds blow with increasing force through anguished nights in which one hears nothing but the grinding, the
moaning of electric lines that criss cross the immense void that we call a city]. These lines of flight conclude in suspension, in mid-flight—between heaven and earth as it were.

Yet the novel also underscores the facelessness of Miryam’s assassin. This central ambiguity, along with the dated moment between October 1988 through winter 1991, makes clear that Laredj’s text is a curse addressed not just to Islamist but also—and most radically—against state-sanctioned, legal violence. Here is the fatal bullet, the founding violence of this tale, its initial shock:

La balle sort d’un pistolet, et le tireur, à son insu, provoque un désastre irréparable. Peut-être un des passants que je croise chaque jour dans les rues, un jeune homme à peine libéré du service national ou antinational. Qui sait? Hélas!... Un militaire, c’est un militaire (12).

The bullet comes from a pistol, and the shooter, unwittingly, provokes an irreparable disaster. Perhaps one of the passersby that I pass every day in the streets, a young man just out of national service, or antinational. Who knows! Helas! A soldier is a soldier.

National or antinational: Who knows! There is something very clear about this ambiguity, this double bind: “Nous avons le choix entre une démocratie anarchique et des ‘Inquisiteurs’! Tu parles d’une situation!” (46).

On the novel’s last page its despairing narrator stands at the precipice of the Telemly bridge. The narrative that is about to conclude is a long lament, addressed by the bereaved to his dead lover. It is also a curse, or rather a plaint in the juridical sense, although since a novel is not a legal trial, what kind of plaint is this exactly? Here the mode of address shifts. The narrator’s last words before leaping into abyss is a series of repetitions, spoken “comme un loup atteint d’une balle en pleine tête” (244). The penultimate page of text, his last reported speech, is this grievance:

Criminels prédateurs, criminels oppresseurs, criminels prévaricateurs, criminels mauvais pasteurs.
Criminels dans le ciel, criminels sur la terre, criminels entre ciel et terre.

Criminels dans les airs, criminels sur les eaux, criminels vociférant, criminels agissant en silence.

Criminels en plein jour, criminels dans la nuit noire, criminels entre chien et loup.

Criminels sanguinaires, criminels tortionnaires, assassins de la mémoire.

Cri…mi…nels des derniers soupirs que brise l’épouvante dans ce désert sauvage.

(244)

In the Arabic the word translated to French as ‘criminels’ is ‘qatala’—much more explicitly, ‘murderers’. Consider the faceless assassin of Miryam: a figure of national or antinational service. Whom does the suicidal speaker accuse of murder just before his leap into the void?

To answer this question (and to register the force of this fictional plaint at the moment it was written), it is helpful to read Laredj’s novel alongside an activist text composed—like it—“sous le choc des premiers témoignages le 17 octobre 1988”. The Cahier noir d’octobre is a collection of torture testimonies and other documents compiled by a collective called the Comité contre la torture, a pamphlet published and circulated in Algiers in 1989 under direction of the committee’s general secretary Anouar Benmalek (who led the committee from 1989-1991, and who oversaw the re-publication and distribution of the Cahier twenty years later). 6 This Cahier also appears several times as an explicit intertext of Laredj’s novel. The cahier includes transcribed testimonies of those arrested, detained, and tortured in the wake of the October 1988 demonstrations, testimony spoken aloud in public fora held by gatherings of citizens in the weeks following the street
uprisings:

Le 17 octobre 1988, quelques jours après les fameux événements, avait eu lieu, à l'université de Bab Ezzouar, une grande assemblée générale des universitaires du centre du pays. *Ce fut un moment terrible d’émotion car, pour la première fois depuis l’indépendance du pays, des citoyens algériens avaient pu témoigner de la torture que leur avaient infligée les forces de l’ordre pendant leur arrestation.* (135)

Like Laredj’s novel, the collection of testimonies was produced by the shock of that terrible moment after the state’s ‘forces of order’ clandestinely arrested, shot, imprisoned, and tortured citizens. Recalling this moment—before Islamism became the public face of ‘terror’ behind which the state could hide its crimes—helps to see the impossible double bind reflected in fictional Miryam’s position. She has a bullet in her head put there—likely—by a soldier of the state that will kill her if she moves; the new Inquistors will possibly kill her if she decides to dance; yet she dances anyway, and dies midflight.

The *Cahier noir d’octobre* compiles several dozen transcribed and translated testimonies (of Arabic-speaking) Algerians rounded up, abducted, arrested, detained, and tortured by security forces/police in Algiers, Blida, Tipasa, Cherchell, Mostaganem during the weeks immediately after the demonstrations during which the fictional Miryam is shot. The *Cahier*’s multiplication of testimonies quickly becomes repetitive, clinically detailed, and quite difficult to read: a 25 year old taxi driver. A 22 year old painter. A 20 year old seller of fruits and vegetables. 17 year old, unemployed. A 56 year old war veteran, wounded. Student. Teacher. Some victims are named, but many are anonymous; frequently listed are the names of those who listened to and recorded the testimonies. It’s a notebook, a dossier, a collection, a staging of collectivity to raise plaint against the state, the police, and the law.8

Here testimony is configured as an act not of speaking but rather a scene of address, an act of listening and receiving that structurally implicates the named recipients and by extension the reader of the transcribed testimonies. The authors of the *Cahier* make this
structure of responsibility explicit in direct injunctions to the reader to fulfill “votre responsabilité de témoin” (62) and to take on “le problème du jugement des tortionnaires d’octobre” (137). The authors of the Cahier noir are unambiguous about who the responsible criminals are, that is who is to be judged: “la main du crime est guidée par des commanditaires et justifiée par la raison d’Etat” (9). This accusation, direct and clear, cuts through the facelessness of an impersonal ‘on’:

Et pourtant ‘on’ tortura encore et encore et la liste serait bien longue de tous les crimes perpétrés au nom de la raison de l’état. PRS, FPS, ORP, PAGS, intégristes, benbellistes, divers opposants ou victimes des luttes d’appareils—à chaque ‘affaire’ de répression politique et policière cette pratique revient et parfois les torturés d’hier—ou leurs exécutants—torturent, ou se taisent, au nom de pouvoir. À chaque ‘affaire’, les récits hallucinatoires devant une justice impuissante ou lâchement complice. (8)

The authority to judge these torturers falls outside the purview of the law, as the collective authors of the Cahier noir make clear in statements such as this one:

Et leurs témoignages noués, presque murmurs ont la force du cri car ils dénoncent les mensonges officiels, le silence et l’oubli qu’on a voulu imposer… Écoutons-les car tout torturé a d’abord besoin de notre écoute; écoutons-les pour eux mais aussi pour nous-mêmes… (7)

Their demand is equally unambiguous: “JUSTICE DANS NOTRE PAYS” (10); “jugement des tortionnaires conformément à la constitution et à la loi” (11). The Cahier concludes with a declaration based on the language of the republic’s founding documents, that is, the constitutions of 1976 and 1989: “Pour que: La torture soit définitivement bannie ; L’armée ne tire jamaes sur le peuple ; Justice se fasse” (106). This demand for justice went unfulfilled in 1989, and twenty years later—thanks to amnesty legislation—remains unfulfilled still.

Thus Cahier noir is, much like activist texts that circulated during the anticolonial war, a performative staging of impossible trial. Notably, this dossier was compiled not only in the absence of legal process but also after the interdiction of a symbolic ‘tribunal populaire’ that had been scheduled to be held in La salle Harcha in december 1988 and was twice
interdicted by officials for undisclosed reasons. The authors of the *Cahier* ask pointedly of this unexplained order to cancel the event: “qui a peur de la mobilisation contre la torture?” To give force to this question, they generate a long list of silent marches stopped by the police, of hunger strikes forbidden, and of public demonstrations cancelled, menaced, interdicted, or broken up by security forces on the streets. This ends with a collective demand, in all-caps, to “EXIGER UNE SALLE PUBLIQUE POUR LA TENUE DU TRIBUNAL POPULAIRE CONTRE LA TORTURE.” Citizens organized to hold a people’s tribunal for torture and the state keeps preventing such a trial from taking place. It’s an impasse.

*This* is the moment in which Laredj wrote and published *Sayyidatu l-maqâm*. Both the activist text and the literary text were written in the space of this interdiction of any juridical process, be it in a courtroom or a public tribunal. Both texts were also re-published twenty years later, in 2008 and 2009. Benmalek articulates a danger in the following address to new readers of the *Cahier noir*. This warning should also resonate for a reader of Laredj’s fiction:

D’autres, de plus (et vous mêmes peut-être…), se chargeront de vous fournir les raisons de vous taire, de refermer ce livre avec le soulagement de ne plus “entendre”, de ne plus “savoir”, de ne plus “désigner” les responsables “très visibles” de torture. Ils vous diront qu’il y a eu le terrorisme islamiste et son cortège d’horreurs, qu’il y a l’essentiel et le secondaire, que le fascisme est à nos portes, qu’il faut reserrer les rangs, quitte à avoir parmi nous des éléments douteux, que tout ça c’est de l’histoire ancienne. Bref, toute l’argumentation de la lâcheté dialecticienne! Le pouvoir—et les généraux d’alors—a pu ensuite faire voter par une Assemblée nationale indignée une loi d’amnistie qui absout tous les tortionnaires de leurs crimes en 1988, le people n’oubliera jamais les forfaits de ceux qui se pavanent parce qu’ils ont réussi à se draper dans un nouvelle “honorabilité”. Én cela, la contribution du CACT et du Cahier noir d’octobre est—je pèse mes mots—historique! (162)

The *Cahier noir d’octobre* and *Sayyidatu l-maqâm* were both written before the ‘year of ashes’ and the ‘dark decade,’ before a time when it became even more difficult to hear, see, and name the visible perpetrators of torture; both texts bear witness to the legal violence eclipsed by
the rhetoric of terror in more recent years. The *Cahier* was published as a form of public testimony, and Laredj’s novel lays explicit claim to register and multiply elegies that elude the capacity of a text like the *Cahier*. At one point, the novel’s narrator complains that Comité contre la torture is too sterile and inadequate in the face of the rampant double forces of violence devouring Algiers since October; a few pages later, the medical doctor treating Miryam announces his desire to testify to the committee about the nature of the torture wounds he has treated (42-43), yet the novel’s folding in stories not just of the tragedies tortured but of the unbearable grief of their mothers throughout the city marks and exceeds that activist ambition. Thus Laredj’s novel supplements the quest for justice in a substantial way, reflecting explicitly on the failure of the state and the limits of activism such as that carried out by the Comité contre la torture.

Laredj could have written this fiction in French, but he did not. Like many Algerians he is a polyglot, and explains his decision to write literary fiction in Arabic by telling a story about his grandmother: after his father died under torture in a Tlemcen prison during the Algerian war for independence, his mother was compelled to work to support six children, and so Laredj was raised by his paternal grandmother. He frames it as a story of absence, and an act of love:

Mon lien à la langue arabe fut d’abord affectif. Ma grand-mère, pour qui l’islam est inséparable de la langue, m’a poussé vers l’arabe. Apprendre l’arabe est un geste d’amour pour cette femme qui a incarné pour moi les images absentes du père et de la mère.

My link to the Arabic language was first affective. My grandmother, for whom Islam is inseparable from the language, pushed me toward Arabic. To learn Arabic is a gesture of love for this woman who incarnated for me the absent images of the father and the mother.¹⁰
He could have written in French but in an act of love for his grandmother Laredj wrote fiction in Arabic. Two decades later, also as an act of love, Marcel Bois translated *Sayyidatu l-maqām* into French in collaboration with Laredj.

Laredj’s claim to literary Arabic as a medium of translation must be understood in a context of state Arabization policies and monolingual nationalism, a founding antinomy of the Algerian nation-state. Recognizing the importance of translation on the Algerian literary scene helps to challenge the persistent yet inaccurate supposition that the Arabophone and Francophone literary worlds are separate, or that language choice implies a political valence; they are in fact deeply intertextual and connected via practices of translation, and neither has a particular claim to liberatory politics. Furthermore, Laredj’s text defamiliarizes the very concept of terror by reworking the narrative motifs of the 1001 Nights. I read this intertextual translation as a dissident act on the part of Waciny Laredj that opens to question the authority of the state, in the mode of ‘curse you, Shahriyar!’—and insist that this act is dissident precisely because it lays claim to an Arabic exposed as open to the most radical graftings of translation.

Marcel Bois—a ninety-year-old Catholic priest born in a small Savoie village who has lived in Algiers since 1961—translated *Sayyidatu l-maqam* in collaboration with Laredj in 2009. The two are close friends. This happens to be Bois’s personal favorite of all of Laredj’s novels, of which Bois has translated about a half-dozen. Let me emphasize that Marcel Bois is the preeminent Arabic-to-French translator of modern Algerian literature: Bois singlehandedly translated the novelist Abdelhamid Benhedouga’s entire oeuvre (Benedouga is often described as the ‘father’ of Arabic-language Algerian literature). Bois also translated Tahar Wattar’s fiction until 1993, when he stopped abruptly for a reason I will briefly discuss. At this point, I want to make it quite clear that while Bois’s French translations
surely anticipate readers in France and the wider French-speaking world, they also and perhaps most importantly address Algerian readers of French.

Novelist Mohammad Dib put a point on this in his remarks at a public tribute to Benhedouga held in Paris in 2000, in which Dib credited Bois’s French translations as what made it possible for him—an Algerian educated in the French colonial system and therefore functionally illiterate in literary Arabic—to read Benhedouga’s texts at all:

Les traductions que Marcel Bois a faites des romans de Benhedouga sont les seules que je connaisse… la réussite de Marcel Bois est éclatante. Il vous livre de véritables recréations des œuvres qu’il traduit et les romans de Benhedouga en valaient aussi la peine, il les a aimés. Dire qu’on voit se reproduire a chaque coup ce miracle!13

(Marcel Bois’s translations of Benhedouga’s novels are the only ones that I know… Marcel Bois’s accomplishment is illuminating. He renders true recreations of the works that he translates, and Benhedouga’s novels were worth the trouble, he loved them. Let’s say that we see a miracle reproduced with every stroke!)

Dib’s enthusiasm for Marcel Bois’s translations is a widely shared sentiment on the Algerian literary scene, where he is deeply respected. In a profile of Bois that he wrote for *El Watan* in 2006, Laredj sheds further light on the unassuming conviction that compelled Bois to remain in Algiers and continue to translate when Algeria “faced that killing maching during the 1990s”—and Bois, like so many intellectuals, received death threats. Why did you stay in Algeria, Laredj asked his translator, who responded: “Where would I go? Rachid Mimouni said, to stay is to die a little; to leave is to die completely. I prefer to stay and die a little. I believe profoundly in destiny. The earth is one and indivisible. Death is wherever one goes.”14

Recall that the same year Laredj first published *Sayyidatu l-maqam*, death—threats of death, anxiety about death, and routine murder and disappearance—pervaded Algiers. This is the year that Tahar Djaout was assassinated. While the killing was claimed by the GIA,
compelling evidence suggests that agents of the state carried out then framed the killing. The novelist Tahar Wattar—who positioned his own prolific literary career as vindicating Arabic against French as the properly Algerian literary language—publicly disparaged Djaout after Djaout’s death in 1993. Wattar’s refusal to extend the respect of mourning to Djaout is in fact precisely what motivated Bois to stop translating Wattar. Here is Bois on that decision, in the profile written by Laredj: “Cet homme-là ne fait plus partie de mon cercle, dès lors qu’il a déclaré après la mort de Djaout que c’était une perte pour sa famille et pour la France. J’ai trouvé cela inadmissible. C’est quelqu’un qui n’admet pas les autres. Je n’ai plus de relation avec lui et même s’il venait à écrire un best-seller, je ne serai pas son traducteur.”

[From the moment he declared, after Djaout’s death, that this was a loss for Djaout’s family and for France [but not for Algeria], that man no longer belonged to my circle. I found it inadmissible. This is is someone who does not admit or accept others. I no longer have any relation to him, and even if he writes a best-seller I will not be his translator.]

This gives a feel for the conditions under which literary translation has been carried out in Algeria in recent decades, and of the debates in which Bois and Laredj, along with so many others, participate: these are quite literally matters of life and death, marked by a distinct and real sense of urgency. These writers and translators define their circle neither along linguistic nor national lines but by friendship and by a shared ethos of translation. They cite and refer to one another in conversation and in interviews on these points. For example here Waciny Laredj cites Marcel Bois citing Abdelhamind Benhedouga, who responds to the question of language choice (Arabic or French) in these terms: “la langue est la patrie de l’écrivain, en dehors de son rôle d’instrument de la communication. Ce qui distingue un écrivain d’un autre écrivain, ce n’est pas la langue qu’il utilise, mais les valeurs dont il est porteur. La littérature obscurantiste, qu’elle soit écrite dans ‘la langue du Paradis’
ou dans “la langue du diable” est une littérature antihumaine” (Laredj article on Bois).

[Language is the writer’s homeland, beyond its role as an instrument of communication. That which distinguishes a writer from another is not the language that he uses but the values that he carries. Obscurantist literature, whether it is written in the ‘language of paradise’ or the ‘language of the devil’, is an antihuman literature.]

This self-consciously critical position with respect to linguistic nationalism is pinned to ideas of rightness and justice that emerge from negotiating difference in language, not between languages. Again, Laredj cites Bois’s description of his translating practice:

“Traduire, c’est d’abord aimer avant d’aborder sérieusement un livre…Les mots doivent s’installer et retrouver leur places justes qui leur revient de droit” [To translate is above all to love a book before approaching it seriously…The words must install themselves, and must rediscover their just and correct places, places that come back to them by right.] Against the grain of monolingual nationalist ideology that defends difference as the grounds for sovereignty and against a globalized transnationalism that flattens difference for easy transport and consumption, Bois elaborates on this implicit connection between problems of justice and the labor of translating:

Nous rêvons tous d’une mondialisation idéale, d’un universel accueillant à tous les particularismes, sans notion de domination. Mais le monde étant ce qu’il est, toutes les cultures ne disposant pas de moyens égaux, on assiste à deux types de réactions : soit un repli, une fermeture, avec une certaine agressivité, soit une volonté de rencontre, de communication, et c’est là que la traduction entre en jeu… (in Laredj article)

[We all dream of an ideal globalization, of a universal that accommodates all particularisms without notion of domination. But the world being as it is, and all cultures not arranged equally, we see two types of reactions: whether a retreat, a closing-in, with a certain aggressiveness, or a willingness to encounter, to communicate—and that is where translation enters into play…]
Marcel Bois—with Benhedouga, with Laredj, in defense of Djaout against Wattar—invites us to understand translating as an act of love, and as an approach to language that labors to find the right and just place for words in relation to each other, and that thereby opens rather than closes a language to the languages of others.

1001 Nights—in particular its frame story, that famous stand-off between Shahrazad and Shahriyar, staged by the Russian ballet by which Miryam is deeply obsessed—is both thematic intertext and governing narrative principle of Laredj’s novel.¹⁶ This is announced explicitly, with Miryam’s last words on the text’s first pages:

Les seuls souvenirs qui me restent : des grincements, un déferlement tumultueux, et les dernière paroles de Miryam, avant que le médecin palestinien ne reture les tuyaux de son nez, de sa bouche, de sa tête, quand soudainement son cœur s’est arrêté, en plein récit de la dernière nuit dans la salle de danse : elle se laisse emporter par sa passion pour le ballet de Rimski-Korsakov et elle, Shéhérazade, affronte le tyran frustré qui avait juré de la décapiter. Dieu te maudisse, Chahriyar! Tu réalises que tu as perdu, tes mains n’ont plus qu’à dissimuler ton impuissance entre tes cuisses, et toi, à disparaître! (13)

[...a grinding, a tumultuous breaking, and Miryam’s last words just before the Palestinian doctor removed the tubes from her nose, from her mouth, from her head, when her heart suddenly stopped, in the middle of reciting the last night in the dance studio: she let herself be transported by her passion for the Rimsky Korsakov ballet and she, Shahrazad, confronts the frustrated tyrant who swore to decapitate her. God damn you, Shahriyar!]...

Laredj establishes a link between Shahrazade, Miryam-incarnating-Shahrazade, and his haunted narrator—a metatexual commentary on the precarity and promise of narrative under threat of death that prompts the reader to reflect on Laredj’s (and perhaps Bois’s) own positions with respect to the violence of their time and place: “Dans ce pays,” asserts this narrator, “nous n’avons pas d’autre choix que d’écrire. Je me suis rappelé ses derniers mots:
A un de ces jours! Quand on écrit, la première phrase est la plus difficile: on a toujours l’impression de se trouver face au danger, à l’abîme, à l’impossible.” (73). [In this country, we have no other choice but to write. I remember her last words: till one of these days! When we write, the first sentence is the most difficult: one has always the impression of finding oneself in the face of danger, the abyss, the impossible.] God damn you, Shahriyar!

What might we make of the *Alf layla wa layla* intertext? Posed the question in an interview with Rachid Mokhtari, Laredj offers a story from his own Arabic language instruction:

Les Mille et une Nuits est un texte qui sommeille en moi depuis ma tendre enfance. Il est ma référence inévitable… À l’école coranique, placé sur le même rayon que les livres saints, je tombe sur un exemplaire des Mille et une Nuits que je vole et lis en secret. Le fait d’écrire a été déterminé par cet acte illicite. Je garde toujours d’ailleurs cet exemplaire avec moi. La lecture des Nuits m’a fait définitivement sortir du sacré. (in *El Watan*)

[The 1001 Nights is a text that has slept within me since my earliest childhood. It is my inevitable reference… At Quranic school, placed on the same shelf as the sacred books, I come across a copy of the 1001 Nights that I steal and read secretly. My writing fate was determined by that illicit act. I still have that copy with me. Reading the Nights pushed me definitively outside the sacred.]

This authorless collection of stories comes to us from so many places, so many forms, so many languages: it is the archive of translation, the ultimate unfinished text that resists closure, that defers completion. In the introduction to her study *Narratives of Catastrophe*, Nasrin Qader reads the 1001 Nights as a narrative mode of putting to question the very notions of self-possessing sovereignty on which nation-states are built and languages claimed as ground for communal identity. Noting that the frame story stand-off between Shahrazad and king Shahriyar stages a relationship of storytelling, death (rape, decapitation), and the law (a sovereign tyrant), Qader writes:
With storytelling, Shahrazad interrupts the repetitive economy of death, while she is still threatened by this economy. So long as there is the story, the menace of death, though abated temporarily, looms large on the horizon. The reprieve every night, as she faces the king and tells her tale, remains uncertain and threatened…This fragile dynamic of Shahrazad’s survival constitutes the condition of singularity of narration, each and every time. 1001 Nights sets up the scene of the singularity of each night and each tale, infinitely repeated..each night and tale threatened with annihilation and open to the future. Therefore the text of 1001 Nights tells the story of a life, recit, at a distance from the subject. *This life tells its story by telling about other lives.* Shahrazad never speaks of herself, there is no I of narration, except in the formula balaghani (I have heard, it has reached me) which, by its formulaic structure, empties itself of signification. (15)

The nameless narrator of Laredj’s text is also a dispossessed I: he has no story except by telling about the life of another whom he loved, for whom he grieves, by whom he is haunted, by whose loss he is undone. His narrative and hers splice so intricately together in passages that one first-person perspective becomes almost indistinguishable from the other—a narrative version of Miryam’s own desire to incarnate Shahrazad so utterly that she herself becomes transparent. This intertextual reworking of the Nights is *also* an illicit move, in that its critique of Islamist violence stands in for what cannot be so easily enunciated: if the bullet in Miryam’s brain came from the national police, then the furious curses with which the text concludes are not directed at Islamists but at the state and its law.

To conclude, I turn to the two death scenes that organize this novel. Should we chart its temporal arc, these would be the first and final moments of the tale. Violent death is the condition of narrative possibility and its inevitable conclusion—yet the instant of dying is not part of this story. Miryam lies in a hospital bed, having collapsed after rehearsing Sheherazade for a performance that will never take place because the National Theater has just been closed. At her request, her lover reads aloud from his incomplete novel manuscript. He reads a passage that depicts his watching her dance the part of Sheherazade.
—and then looks up from the page to realize that she has died in the middle of his sentences, and feels tormented to know that he cannot and will never know precisely the moment that she slipped away. There is a sudden tense shift: ‘Je n’avais pas lâché la main de Miryam. J’en perçois jusqu’à ce jour. Je ne pouvais imaginer que je tenais la main d’une morte emportée par une balle ‘nationale’…’ (223) [I never let go of Miryam’s hand. I can feel it to this day. I could not imagine that I held the hand of a corpse taken away by a ‘national’ bullet]—and again here here names that bullet ‘national.’ To what new criminals is the curse addressed?

The bereft lover walks his way toward the Telemly bridge. The narrative gathers urgency as a series of repetitions drive toward the novel’s last page. His walk ends at the bridge, where he stands on the steel railing dropping pages of the incomplete manuscript (from which he has just read to dying Miryam) into the abyss below (241). The repetitions begin with a series of lines addressed Miryam ! (229-231), a series of farewells (242), and then a series of curses (244) just before the last page.

These are not just curses but plaints, in the sense of an accusation of crime: Criminels ! Criminels ! Criminels ! (in Arabic: qatala ! qatala ! qatala !) The penultimate paragraph stages his leap as suspension over the void below (‘Je me refuse à regarder l’abîme une fois encore. Je ferme les yeux. Advienne que pourra!’) but the last lines of the text—we are to imagine the narrator hears this coming from a window nearby as he falls to his
death—are words from verse of song by Cheikh Ghaffour, the musical master of arabo-andalucian ‘gharnati’ (Grenada) music—a lament addressed to another lost beloved named Miryam. He never hits the ground.

_Sayyidatu l-maqam_ ends quite up in the air—with its narrator midfall, or midflight, his body suspended moments from a death that is surely inevitable yet is not represented on the page, thus deferred infinitely. That moment of closure is not part of this narrative; in its place is an opening. The novel’s last lines are given over to another first-person, this verse of song said to come from elsewhere, an open window playing a record somewhere in an apartment below. In this dispossession the narrator’s speaking self becomes transparent, open at the edges, gives way to the sound of another’s desire to speak with the lover he has lost—a question, _Kayf al-hal?_, and an ellipses… as if this lover-martyr might defy death for just a moment more.

In sum, my argument is that Laredj reanimates Shahrazad-Shahriyar frame story of 1001 nights as an act of resistance that opens state violence—not just Islamist terror—to critical judgment and condemnation. Not only is this a pointed rebuke of the position articulated by Tahar Wattar and endorsed by the state’s Arabization policies—but it also lays claim to Arabic as a language in and of translation. It insists that Arabic remain open to the languages of others _and_ and reminds that it has long been so open. This unsettles any ideological claim to the language’s political or religious primacy in an act of dispossession figured not as an act of radical violence but one of radical love.
In interview with Rachid Mokhtari: ‘…Je comprends la littérature par la capacité de capter ce qui est essentiel dans la société mais sa fonction n’est pas de reproduire ce qu’elle capte mais de refaire une autre histoire, qui est certainement en relation avec l’histoire du pays, mais qui dépasse l’écriture simpliste d’un témoignage…il faut éviter, à mon sens, si bien sûr si on s’installe à l’intérieur de la littérature, qu’elle soit seulement une reproduction de réel. Il faut essayer d’aller voir se qui se cache derrière.’ (158)

Here the reference is to *Algérie le livre noir* published by Amnesty International, Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l’homme, Human Rights Watch, and Reporters sans frontières. See especially the chapter ‘Algérie : la guerre civile à huis clos” for documentation of this systematic and explicit procedure of whiting out. It documents a series of cases—the state declares an armed group responsible, then holds a trial without observers. The state then gets to legally hold terrorists responsible and present itself not just as blameless but as arbiter of justice. In these conditions the legal protocols are tools of repression and complicity, a force of fiction. The ‘real’ is actually false; fiction is the only place where truth can be told. Who killed Djaout is still a complete enigma, and Djaout is just one case (the most famous, a very strong symbol). See the section on Djaout’s murder, pp. 16-18, which also discusses the Comité pour la vérité organized by Boucbechi, for which he was killed (also a killing attributed to Islamists). The details are all here. The letter of condolence to the family of Tahar Djaout: “Le crime dont a été victime Tahar Djaout ne restera pas impuni. Il ne fera que renforcer la détermination du gouvernement à poursuivre inébranlablement son action visant à l’éradication du terrorisme et à la restauration de la paix civile” 17. But the details do not align and the report concludes: ‘De fait, la version « officiel » de l’assassinat de Tahar Djaout, établie d’après les aveux télévisés de Belabessi, a été démentie par une décision de justice, et l’identité des véritables coupables de l’assassinat demeure une énigme” (18).

Whose violence they feared isn’t clear, and given the details above it probably wasn’t clear to them whom to fear. Laredj, in interview with Katia Ghosn, “Waciny Laredj, un pont entre deux rives,” in *L’orient littéraire* December 2010: “J’ai été amené à traduire moi-même *Sayyidat al-maqqam* (Les ailes de la reine) parce qu’aucun éditeur n’en voulait. Ce roman qui raconte le destin d’une jeune danseuse assassinée pendant les émeutes de 1988 critique durement l’islamisme, condamne leur côté criminel et leur vision obscurantiste. Même Dâr al-Adâb qui s’apprêtait à le publier s’est rétracté à la dernière minute. Le Liban n’a pas échappé à cette vague de peur suite à plusieurs assassinats qui ont coûté la vie à Hussein Mroueh et d’autres. Sachant que pour les mêmes raisons Hárisat al-dhilâl (La gardienne des ombres) ne trouvera pas preneur, je l’ai directement écrit en français et retraduit moi-même vers l’arabe. Mais j’ai renoncé définitivement à cette pratique car j’ai constaté que je me permettais beaucoup de libertés ; la traduction devenait une réécriture où les deux versions ne se ressemblaient plus.”

“On nous a volé notre ville, comme on dérobe les étoiles. Frappée de vétusté, elle ressemble à un mourant émergeant des décombres” (36). “Une force rampant travaille à faire de la ville un désert” (39). “Ta ville est une marâtre sauvage qui cultive le malheur. Une tristesse indicible se répand insidieusement comme le cancer, la misère, le sida et la came. La peste arrive, elle est en route, mon amour.” (41)

6 Benmalek republished the text 5 October 2009, prefacing it with a question that should haunt reading the 2009 French translation of Laredj’s novel as well: “Vingt ans après, que reste-t-il d’Octobre 1988 et de ses centaines de morts ? Un crime impuni d’abord, la torture. Puis des victimes suppliciées qui souffrent encore dans leurs âmes, et, pour beaucoup, dans leurs corps. Enfin des tortionnaires d’État impunis et confortés dans leurs pratiques. Ce constat est amer. Pour que la victoire des tortionnaires ne soit pas complète en Algérie, il faut lui opposer sans cesse la parole des victimes, à défaut de justice.” Also note that it is widely available as a pdf online.

7 Not just one gathering, but a series of organizing moves and attempts to stand together. See also p. 98 the ouverture de premier rassemblement contre la torture held 24 November 1988. The group makes a statement of position, and notice this move in its closing sentence: GLOIRE AUX MARTYRS D’OCTOBRE, FILS DE NOVEMBRE! unpack that sentence! the claim to history it is making! the use of the word martyr again on p. 97, and chouhada, p. 98. also the way that the text (or was it the public tribunal?) closes with a verse from mohamed sehaba, unpublished “hymne improvisé pour des funérailles absentes” (November 1988). consider—for all the testimonies collected here, consider all that can never be spoken or recorded, the absent witnesses.

8 The *Cahier* also multiplies voices by including a series of other documents authored by numerous different groups, including denunciations of torture by: Ligue algérienne des droits de l’homme; Déclaration des journalistes algériens; Appel pour un mobilisation contre la torture, déclaration par universitaires; a group of moudjahidate addressed the president of Algeria in a letter; déclaration du comité médical de lutte permanente contre la répression et la torture; this committee is notably and profoundly “popular” bringing together moudjahidate, the association of children of the chouhada, university groups, lawyers, ligue des droits de l’homme, committees of doctors, collectives of lawyers, artists, painters, filmmakers, town committees against torture.

9 They compiled and published this text at great risk, as a number of members of the committee were later assassinated.

In 1964, Mostefa Lacheraf wrote that Arabic became a hostage of nationalism after Independence; in 1998, the Algerian government unilaterally declared Arabic the only official language of Algeria. Anne Marie Berger, in *Algeria in Others Languages*, warns against the too-tidy schema that describes the radicalization of linguistic issues in the 1990s along neat lines: Arabophone, Francophone, Berberophone (here she is taking issue with Harbi’s characterization). Arabic itself as riven, a “founding ambiguity of the politics of Arabization…the situation has produced endless and fascinating ‘performative paradoxes’” (Berger 3). She writes: “Linguistic practices thus greatly complicate the lines of political opposition or complicity that are said to define the Algerian landscape today. Rather than corresponding to neat geo-ethnic borders, they point to numerous internal political and cultural splits” (9).

The founding antinomy and performative paradox highlighted deftly by Berger is of course nowhere better articulated than by Derrida in his *Monolingualism of the other*. Bear in mind that this text is also a text of the Algerian civil war: began as a public talk at colloquium in New Orleans in 1992, published in French in 1996, published in English translation in 1998. The text meditates on Derrida’s “unforgettable and ungeneralizable” experience and education in Algiers, which he never left until 19 years old. Read this text as a grievance, a battle against monolingual nationalism, as a demonstration in the political sense of standing on public streets with compatriot translator-poets. Note that the two ‘incompossible’ laws on which Derrida’s demonstration against monolingual nationalist violence unfolds are these can be read as also describing the antinomy of the Algerian political scene in the 1990s: 1) We only ever speak one language (which became an actual law in Algeria in 1998, when unelected Algerian national assembly unilaterally declared Arabic the only language) (yes, but) 2) We never speak only one language. Derrida tells us that this double postulation “Is not only the very law of what is called translation. It would also be the law itself as translation” (10).

From an unpublished photocopied text given to me by Marcel Bois, with Dib’s handwritten notes on it, from the 2000 tribute and panel in Paris. The panel included Benhedouga, Bois, and Dib among others. The full text reads: « Les traductions que Marcel Bois a faites des romans de Benhedouga sont les seules que je connaisse. Ce fut assez, quand elles m’avaient frappé par leur qualité exceptionnelle. Le phénomène est rare. Je crois pouvoir l’affirmer, premièrement parce que d’énormes lectures d’œuvres traduites m’ont appris à m’y reconnaître un peu là-dedans, deuxièmement, parce que les problèmes du
transfert ou de la reconversion d’un ouvrage dans une autre langue m’ont toujours passionné et que je les ai plus ou moins étudiés, troisièmement parce que j’en ai tâté, moi-même, de la traduction. Je sais donc de quoi je parle.

Dans ce domaine, la réussite de Marcel Bois est éclatante. Il vous livre de véritables récréations des œuvres qu’il traduit et les romans de Benhedouga en valaient aussi la peine, il les a aimés. Dire qu’on voit se reproduire à chaque coup ce miracle ! Pour ma part, je n’en reviens pas et je suis heureux de vous tirer symboliquement le chapeau que je ne porte guère, Marcel Bois. »


15 A video of the interview in which Tahar Wattar makes this statement is available online. For the sentences that caused the uproar, see minute 5:23 of this interesting interview in which he discusses his relationship with Djabout, and in particular their differences of opinion concerning language: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUtvpzcBqlk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUtvpzcBqlk)

16 There are in fact two governing thematic and generic intertexts of this novel. The more obvious and most commented upon is *Arf layla ma layla*, and that this my focus here, yet the other is equally significant. A future iteration of this study will delve into the twin intertexts. Miryam in fact dances two different ballets throughout the novel: before preparing *Shéhérazade*, she is performing the title role of *La berbère*, a (fictional) ballet based on a fictional opera by (nonfictional) Mohamed Igerbouchène that stages the life of Fadhma Aït Mansour Amrouche, author of *Histoire de ma vie*, an extraordinary text by a French-literate Kabyle Christian born in remote Kabyle in the late 19th century. In the novel, the Russian ballet instructor and choreographer Anatolia transforms the opera into ballet so that Miryam can dance it. (Igerbouchène was an actual composer and pianist, Kabyle, one of the great Algerian composers who wrote among other things a hundred melodies based on the 1001 Nights; he also taught Chleuh, Chaoui, Tamashq languages at the Ecole des langues orientales in Paris from 1939 to 1942.) Miryam performs *La berbère* the night that the narrator meets her, just before she is shot; she dances *Shéhérazade* after the bullet is lodged in her brain. Her desire is explicitly to incarnate both figures: Fadhma Amrouche and Shéhérazade, as she says: “Un sentiment profond commence à me dévorer : chaque fois que je répète La Berbère je ressens un douleur poignante. Je l’ai dans le sang. Je sais la souffrance de ne pas connaître son père. Je me retrouve en elle : son présent, son passé, son exil.” (61)…. “…mais maintenant je suis hanté par Shéhérazade” (68). The explicit staging of these two musical intertexts theatricalizes their status as translations, transfigurations. Laredj claims the French-speaking Kabyle and the Arabic urtext of translation as central sources and inspirations; moreover both make primary the experiences and suffering of women, and both are preoccupied with freedom. This is the haunting of Arabic that Laredj performs: a claim to Arabic as radically open, the provenance of others, of women. The narrator’s claim charts this feminist Algérianité: “Au fond de chacun de nous, Miryam, il y a quelquechose de La berbère, du tourmente de Fadhma Aït Amrouche.” (68)
CODA

WRITING STRIKE
The Politics of Fiction in the Postcolony

Je ne demande rien, seulement qu’ils nous hantent encore, mais dans quelle langue?"

I ask for nothing: only that they haunt us still. … But in what language?

Assia Djebar, Le blanc de l’Algérie

1

Reading Assia Djebar’s fiction as political is itself an effort to do her justice. The questions that animate her work are questions that haunt our time—concerning the unfinished work of decolonization, the future of feminist solidarities, the dangers of nationalism and identitarianism, the afterlives of political violence, and the promise and terror of linguistic and cultural difference. Djebar’s ambivalent reception in and long exile from Algeria was set in motion at least as early as 1962, when she—just after independence—was publicly disparaged by nationalist intellectuals as insufficiently committed to the project of decolonization. After independence, Djebar was pushed out of her post in the history department at the University of Algiers because she would or could not teach in Arabic. In an interview published in Sartre’s Les temps modernes (1963), Mostefa Lacheraf singled out Djebar as a culturally alienated French-speaking bourgeois with no grasp of “our” Algerian realities, more concerned with poetry than with proper politics. Lacheraf’s implicitly sexist condemnation had enduring consequences for Djebar’s reception and future work in Algeria, as she has noted: “My life as a woman tripped me up” (“Woman’s Memory” 169). Lacheraf misread the depth and nuance of Djebar’s political vision—in particular her gendering of decolonization, and the challenge of her aesthetic
imagination and practice.²

Djebar’s resistance to monolingual nationalism gives an opening to differently imagine decolonization and the politics of aesthetics. While much has been made of Djebar’s relation to French, much less has been said of her equally complex relation to Arabic. Djebar’s decision to write in French has elicited criticism in Algeria, but Djebar rejects the dichotomy between Arabic and French is a false and ideological one. She figures her experience of this linguistic fissure as a “tangage-langage” or “tangage entre deux langues”—that is, a vertiginous reeling or pitching between two languages whose movement is interrupted by Algeria’s profound and officially disavowed heteroglossia: “par phobie de la deuxième langue, de la troisième, par déni d’un multilinguisme inscrit dans notre culture depuis l’Antiquité” (“by phobia of the second language, the third, by the refusal of a multilingualism inscribed in our culture since Antiquity”). Djebar reminds us that to cast Arabic against French reinforces the theoretical monolingualism imposed on Algeria by the postcolonial state, itself an act of violence: “un monolinguisme pseudo-identitaire: une seule langue revendiquée comme une armure, une carapace, un mur!” (“a pseudo-identitarian monolingualism: a single language claimed like armor, shell, wall!” [“L’entre-deux-langues” 32–33]).

I read Assia Djebar’s novel *La disparition de la langue française* (published 2003) as a critique of violence that exposes the radical misfit of justice to law in postcolonial Algeria, and that does so in the language declared by law to be disappearing.³ On the last page of *La disparition de la langue française*, a note indicates that Djebar wrote it in *New York, 2003*, so the shadow of September 11 falls over a novel that opens the archive of Algeria’s independence war from a narrative present at the cusp of its descent into civil war (the novel’s setting is Algiers, 1991-92). That is, at least three wars haunt the text. Like Djebar’s earlier *Le blanc de
l’Algérie (1995) this text is also an act of mourning—yet it is a fiction, not a récit.

La disparition de la langue française is most obviously ‘about’ la décennie noire, and reflects Djebar’s preoccupation with the ghastly return of the techniques of colonizing violence (torture, extrajudicial arrest, mass execution) in the institutions of the postcolonial state: “le relais du colonialisme d’hier”, as she calls this disturbing repetition (‘Tout doit-il disparaître ?’). Prompted to account for the failures of decolonization by what she called (in Le blanc de l’Algérie) “une nuit Algérienne qui n’est plus coloniale” (235), Djebar performs a rite of literary haunting, as if to make the unquiet ghosts of the revolutionary past speak in a newly terrifying time: “Une nation cherchant son cérémonial, sous diverses formes, mais de cimetière en cimetière, parce qu’en premier l’écrivain a été obscurément offert en victime propitiatoire : étrange et désespérante découverte!” (Ces voix 248). Djebar’s peculiar disruption of nationalist historiography confirms Edward Said’s insight, in ‘Freud and the Non-European,’ the last lecture he delivered just before his own death during the same year (2003) that Djebar published La disparition: “Later history reopens and challenges what seems to have been the finality of an earlier figure of thought” (Said 25). The novel’s ambivalent refiguring of the Algerian national epic lays open to question both the political instrumentalization of that state-founding war in postcolonial Algeria and the reductive ways in which Algeria has been scripted as prehistory of and pedagogical case-study for the Global War on Terror.

The novel’s title calls to mind the politically orchestrated disappearance of both the French language and of its speakers during the crisis that ravaged Algeria during the 1990s: “On 5 July 1998, following the recommendation of the (undemocratically elected) National Assembly, the Algerian government unilaterally declared that Arabic is the only official language of the country” (Gafaiti 19). Thirty years after the anticolonial war heralded
liberation across the decolonizing world, Algeria effectively disappeared from the world’s view. By 2003, the Bouteflika staked its power to the claim that it had vanquished the (Islamist) terrorists who’d taken up arms against the state. The more recent uprisings of the Arab Spring didn’t ignite in Algeria precisely because of the power of the state’s claim and the still vivid trauma of that time—there is a widespread anxiety in Algeria about what can happen when citizens turn on the state. Like many Algerian intellectuals during the 1990s, Djebar was protected by exile, yet she never relinquished her first-person claim to Algerianité, nor to her political imagination and her personal anguish: “Nous, écrivains de l’Algérie, nous sommes en train de disparaître, et nos écrits de témoignage avec nous” (Ces voix 245). Her brother-in-law, the playwright Abdelkader Alloula, was assassinated in Oran in 1994. La disparition’s male protagonist surely resembles Alloula, but also resembles multitudes: a figure for the precarious status of the writer and the literary imagination in (and beyond) the postcolony.

In an essay titled ‘Tout doit-il disparaître?’—written in 1995, from Paris, collected in Ces voix qui m’assiègent—Djebar militates against the conscription of such murders for rhetorics of terror and reminds us that the neoimperial democracy project is gendered and intransigently Islamophobic. Here she distances herself from that project:

Pour ma part, je n’ai guère le goût de m’installer dans le rôle de la victime intellectuelle : ni le chador sur la tête, ni à la main le mouchoir des pleureuses, image trop facile du « pleurer ensemble sur la condition des femmes musulmanes ! » … Cependant, le problème reste entier pour l’écrivain de fiction que je suis : comment élucider la complexité d’un réel meurtrier et contradictoire dans mon pays, nation au bord de la fracture intérieure ? (246)

[As for me, I can hardly stand to place myself in the role of the victimized intellectual: no chador on my head, no weeping women’s handkerchief in my hand, that facile trope of « let’s all cry together over the condition of muslim women ! »… However, the problem remains for the fiction writer that I am: how to elucidate the complexity of a murderous and contradictory reality in my country, a nation at the brink of interior fracture ?]
Djebars question to herself not only informs my reading of La Disparition but articulates central questions at stake in this dissertation: how does a fiction writer elucidate the complexity of a murderous and contradictory reality, a reality at the edge of disaster? If this is the question, what kind of answer is a novel? How does fiction shed light on or supplement ‘un réel meurtrier’?

Today, members of the Collectif des familles des disparus demonstrate regularly in town squares and at bus stops in Algiers, Oran, Blida, Constantine. They stand in the streets against the law to call forth ghosts of those multitudes of disappeared—siblings, children, parents—to whom Bouteflikas amnesty/amnesia legislation offers neither justice nor proper burial. Much like Derridas Monolingualism de l'autre (1995/1998), also a text that theorizes and points beyond the crisis of that dark decade, Djebars novel is a demonstration in the sense of taking to the streets, a kind of standing with those who assemble against the law, those who take a stand in public space to hold up the faces and names of the absent. The justice they demand is juridically impossible, at least for now. As a friend—a taxi driver during the 1990s who was himself arrested and tortured more than once, and who showed me the shackle scars on his wrists during a drive from Algiers to Cherchell to visit Djebars grave there—told me: “the present state is run by the same people who did all of this and everyone knows it. There is no possibility of justice in the state as it is, so I just forgive and move on, or I’d be stuck.”

La disparition moves at this impasse. By unsettling and reworking a history long disavowed by standard French historiography, treated as a footnote or a case study by mainstream U.S. media and by U.S. military institutions5, and retrospectively sanctified by the official origin narrative of the modern Algerian state, Djebars novel enacts a haunting that calls to mind the French word ‘revenant.’ This text reflects the writers powerful desire to return
to a site of improper burial; its form and poetics disturb what has come to appear settled and open what has been forcibly closed. Witness to a civil war that she considers “une nuit algérienne qui n’est plus coloniale” (an Algerian night that is no longer colonial), Djebar turns to the anticolonial past in order to critically reassess an historical sequence that has, since 1962, generated so vast a textual and material archive that we might reasonably wonder if anything new remains to be said of it (Djebar LB 121). La disparition reopens the texts and reawakens the memories the Algerian Revolution to make this event speak, anew, in a muted and dangerous time. My claim is that La disparition de la langue française enacts this process of refiguring a closed history in ways that unstick and unsettle its dominant representations, and that this unsettling is an invitation to imagine democracy that remains to come.

2

La disparition is organized in three parts, each of which is disorganized by a disappearance. The novel begins I. Le Retour, dated 1991: “Berkane est de retour après vingt ans d’émigration en banlieue parisienne” (Berkane has returned after twenty years’ emigration in the Paris suburbs) (15). Berkane takes early retirement from his French administrative job to return his dead mother’s empty house on the coast near Algiers; he visits his childhood home in the Casbah and plans to photograph the prisons where he was detained and tortured in 1961. He begins to write a text that he titles L’adolescent and that he classifies as a ‘récit’ after crossing out the word ‘roman’ (novel) that he initially types on its title page.

This generic hesitation—between verifiable and unverifiable—runs throughout La disparition, which highlights the fictional processes of historiography and stages the structural ambivalence of testimony. Part I is a splicing of fragments of letters addressed by Berkane
to his French ex-lover Maryse alongside passages of third-person descriptive prose that narrate Berkane’s frustrated effort to return to a ‘home’ that has changed beyond recognition. There is no national homeland to which Berkane can return, as all that he remembers has vanished, the nation itself undone. Part II, L’amour l’écriture, is composed of alternating passages identified by dates as Berkane’s journal entries, snippets of what appear to be notes for his work-in-progress, and first-person erotic fragments addressed to his departed lover—the threat of imminent political violence compels her to leave Algiers for Italy. Part II concludes with an incomplete 42-page manuscript (récit) that narrates the demonstrations, arrest, and torture experienced by Berkane in 1957, 1960, and 1961.

In notebook entries about it, Berkane describes his composing this récit as a kind of haunting: “Ici, l’effervescence, mais aussi l’inquiétude. J’ai commencé « L’adolescent » la nuit dernière. Je vis désormais en décembre 60, puis en 61…” (Agitation and also anxiety here. I began ‘The Adolescent’ last night. From now on I live in December 1960, then 1961…) (132). Two troubled times are inscribed in the same sentence as past trauma impinges on the present, and the unquiet phantom of Berkane’s past self returns to possess and disturb him:

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Le pays vit une révolution : un traumatisme, un coup d’état ? En tout cas, cela a tout l’air d’une impasse : choisir entre la caserne et la mosquée, et cela, pour diriger tout un peuple pas tout à fait guéri, même trente ans après, de ses plaies de la guerre d’hier ! Moi, je vis, pour ma propre compte, ma révolution minuscule, ce qui requiert toute mon énergie : « L’adolescent » se met à vivre devant moi. Il bouge, irréel mais fantôme proche, il rêve, écoute les hommes mûrs, les autre détenus comme lui !

(The country is living a revolution : a traumatism, a coup d’état ? In any case, it all seems like an impasse : a choice between the barracks and the mosque and all to lead a people that hasn’t exactly healed, even thirty years later, from the wounds of the last war ! Me, I live, by my own account, my own microcosmic revolution, one that
requires all of my energy: ‘The Adolescent’ is coming to life before me. He moves, unreal but intimate/proximate phantom, he dreams, he listens to the middle-aged men, the other detainees like him.

(Djebar 132-133)

Driven to explore repressed memory of his detention and torture, Berkane reports that he will revisit the Maréchal prison (Tadmaït) to photograph the cells and to ask residents of the nearby village what they remember of the prison—but he never reaches his destination. Berkane disappears in the caesura that separates Part II (L’amour, l’écriture) from Part III (La disparition). The novel’s concluding section (III. La disparition) begins eight days after Berkane’s disappearance on a Kabyle mountain road, so that his first person narrative is abruptly replaced by those of three of his survivors: Berkane’s younger brother Driss, his French lover Marise, and his Algerian lover Nadjia. Berkane’s car is discovered near the road but his body is nowhere to be found: “Berkane évaporé dans l’air ou déjà cadavre au fond d’un fossé?” (Berkane—evaporated into thin air or already a corpse in the bottom of some ditch?) (189).

We never learn what happened to the novel’s vanished protagonist. Though given as possible he has been abducted by adolescent assassins sympathetic to the ‘fous de Dieu’ (‘fools of God’), this is highly uncertain, as Driss notes: “Pas seulement la violence islamiste; il y avait beaucoup de disparus, après interrogatoires de simple suspects par les forces dites « de sécurité »” (Not only Islamist violence; so many simple suspects had disappeared after interrogation by the so-called ‘security forces’) (193). Of Berkane, “victim d’inconnus sans visage” (victim of faceless unknowns) (202), nothing remains—“pas de corps, pas de traces de ravisseurs” (no body, no trace of kidnappers) (198)—except a half-written notebook, a stack of unsent letters addressed to Marise, and a graphically detailed yet unfinished manuscript concerning events that took place in Algiers 1957-1961. As the textuality of the
protagonist is made formally explicit by the novel’s conclusion, the reader recognizes the text she’s been reading is comprised of these fragments, like bits of evidence assembled from a case dossier. Berkane is but an assembly of incomplete and disordered texts, an absent witness, a revenant whose return turns to disappearance. It’s a forensic narrative but the clues do not lead to a culprit. The title is in this sense ironic: everything has disappeared except French prose, yet this is also a French aware of its own imminent vanishing, its own precarity and urgency.

It is a fiction. Yet the ambiguity surrounding Berkane’s disappearance infiltrates and infects the official memory project underway in Algeria at the time that Djebar composed *La disparition* in New York 2003. Given that the identification, accusation, and trying of perpetrators was rendered illegal by the amnesty laws, it might be the exclusive domain of fiction to expose the law’s complicity with injustice. Djebar’s challenge to state-sanctioned memory does not stop here. *La disparition* does a disappearing act of its own: by vanishing key episodes from nationalist historiography—a ritual liturgy of dated events and heroes whose deaths are honored as sacrifice—Djebar also opens to question the state’s self-legitimating authority to distinguish unjustified violence (terror) from justified force (security). What guarantees (or signs, or authorizes) a judgment that decides between legal and illegal violence?

3

Given the multitude of dated events named on the pages of *La disparition*, one omission is striking. Despite its close hewing to the dramatic events that unfolded between 1957 and 1961 in the Algiers Casbah, the text nowhere names the eight-day general strike that was organized there by the combined efforts of Front Libération Nationale (FLN) and
the Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens (UGTA)\(^6\) and carried out by hundreds of thousands of Algerian workers between 28 January and 4 February 1957.\(^7\) While depiction of the ‘grève des huit jours’ dominates thirty minutes of Gilles Pontecorvo’s iconic two-hour film *La bataille d’Alger* (1965), by contrast, reference to this strategic strike appears nowhere in Djebar’s novel. She strikes the strike from Berkane’s historical testimony. This apparent oversight is accented by the novel’s fixation with precisely that time (1957) and place (the Algiers Casbah), a silence made even more conspicuous by the accumulation of so many other proper name-dates in the text.

Djebar doesn’t write the general strike into Berkane’s récit so much as she vanishes it. The event appears in *La disparition*, if it can be said to ‘appear’ at all, as a fleeting reference in a fictional testimony. Midway through ‘*L’adolescent*’ is section that begins with date, 11 December 1960, followed by an extended account of the nationalist demonstration and massacre that took place in the Casbah that day: “Dehors, des milliers des manifestants surgissent de partout: une fourmilière, sortant de tous les recoins de notre Casbah” (Outside, millions of demonstrators appeared everywhere: a hive, emerging from all of the recesses of our Casbah) (146). The subsequent pages narrate a series of events that appear to have taken place on the same date (“la fusillade a commencé” (the shooting has begun)(148)), but there is marked temporal indistinction—“ce tumulte, ce délire, serait-ce un rêve?” (this tumult, this delirium, might it be a dream?) (149). At the conclusion of this narrative sequence, we read:

À la Casbah, l’insurrection dura huit jours …Toutes les écoles sont fermées ; les gamins apprenent la rue, la rue effervescente de la Casbah vive. Tout le long de la rue Marengo, les Européens gardent leurs commerces fermés…Au bout de huit jours, il a fallu se remettre au travail, à la fausse paix! Tous, parmi le petit peuple, à la Casbah, sont des travailleurs payés à la journée. Qui peut, dès lors, se permettre de tenir plus de huit jours sans devoir travailler, même le cœur lourd?
(In the Casbah, the insurrection lasted eight days…All of the schools are closed; kids learn the street, the effervescent street of the vivid Casbah. The whole length of Rue Marengo, the Europeans keep their shops closed …At the end of eight days, it was back to work, back to false peace! In the Casbah, all little people of the lower classes are workers paid by the day. Who, after that long, can afford to take more than eight days without working, even with heavy heart?) (Djebar 150)

This sounds like it must describe the conclusion of the eight-day general strike in January 1957, yet it is dated by Berkane just after 11 December 1960. It is as if the image of one dated event (January 1957) is superimposed on the other (11 December 1960), so that what registers is not how strategic events fall into teleological sequence nor how they support a revolutionary program.

Consider, by contrast, the terms by which the only surviving strategist of the general strike theorizes that event as the defining and revelatory strategy of the Algerian anticolonial war. Benyoucef Ben Khedda lived through the revolution to complete negotiations with France and was briefly interim president of Algeria at independence; he died in 2003, the year that Djebar completed La disparition in New York. A foundation in his name has made his political writings widely available, including the undated six-page “Grève des huit jours” which is archived and published online. This short text outlines the history, justifications, and repercussions of the eight-day general strike, characterizing the event as a military disaster but an incontestable political and psychological victory. Ben Khedda emphatically describes the strike as a “révélateur sans pareil pour éclairer à leur juste mesure les enjeux et les finalités stratégiques du conflit” (unparalleled light that properly illuminates the stakes and the strategic outcomes of the conflict) (Ben Khedda 6).

Ben Khedda notes that the principle of the general strike was decided upon as an intervention in the “cycle infernal terrorisme-contre-terrorisme” that had installed itself by 1956 (2), chosen by the FLN vanguard in order fundamentally transform the course of the anticolonial struggle. According to Ben Khedda, the general strike was selected by the FLN
leadership to interrupt the violent Franco-Algerian ‘tête-à-tête’ and to decisively internationalize the conflict. He argues that while the strike effectively triggered the disastrous escalation of French military violence and torture in and beyond Algiers, it also rehearsed a unified collectivity of the future Algerian nation and drew international attention to the legitimacy of the FLN’s leadership in the armed struggle to break with the French state. Here is Ben Khedda’s conclusion:

Faire le bilan de la «Bataille d’Alger», c’est faire d’abord le bilan de la grève des huit jours, qui fut directement à l’origine de son déclenchement. Si au plan international, notamment, cette grève a majoré le poids du FLN de façon substantielle, elle constitue en revanche une page noire que la Révolution avait dû accepter vaille que vaille. Même cantonnée à l’espace de l’agglomération algéroise, ses péripéties dramatiques furent ressenties à l’époque comme un drame national par le peuple algérien dans son entier. Aujourd’hui encore, elle demeure dans nos consciences une tragédie d’une gravité incommensurable, dont même les manifestations de décembre 1960 ne parviendront jamais à compenser tout à fait le funeste souvenir.

(To calculate the balance of the ‘Battle of Algiers’ is above all to calculate the balance of the eight-day strike, which was its direct trigger. If this strike significantly increased the legitimacy of the FLN on the international scene, it constituted, by contrast, a dark page that the Revolution had to accept at all costs [no matter the cost]. Even contained by the urban spaces of Algeria, its dramatic events would be felt at the time as a national drama by the entire Algerian people. Even today it remains in our conscience a tragedy of incommensurable gravity, a tragedy whose disastrous memory even the December 1960 demonstrations can never cancel out.)

(Ben Khedda 6)

On Benyoucef Ben Khedda’s balance sheet, the general strike was a long-term success, if a short-term affliction. The FLN lost Algiers to the French in 1957, but, as he makes clear, “le FLN la reconquera pour de bon dans la foulée des manifestations populaires de décembre 1960” (the FLN would reconquer [the city] for good in the course of the popular demonstrations of December 1960) (6). That is, Ben Khedda characterizes the strike as a grave tragedy but considers December 1960 a triumph; even if that latter triumph does not cancel out the suffering of Algerians, it justifies and makes sense of it. The FLN lost the battle but won the war. Ben Khedda’s acknowledgement of suffering is formulæic,
delineating the acceptable limits of mourning to commemorate (and organizes) sacrifice for the future nation without dwelling on loss. The injury and damage explored by Djebar in such searing detail is assigned a retroactive significance and justification by Ben Khedda: “il reste que, malgré les dégâts humains et matériels qu'elle a engendrés, la grève des huit jours a fait avancer notablement la cause de la Révolution algérienne” (it remains that, despite the human and material damage that it caused, the eight-day strike notably advanced the Algerian revolution’s cause) (6).

La disparition displaces the nationalist party line on the 1957 eight-day strike with a description of collective anguish, fatigue and anger eight days after the French police gunned down demonstrators in the streets of Algiers in 1960. It also describes a repeat of this grisly scene the following year, when the FLN issued a command radio broadcasted from Cairo to the Casbah instructing the workers and youth to return to the streets on 11 December 1961 to commemorate and protest the previous year’s massacre. Berkane, barely fifteen, dutifully obeys the FLN injunction to “«Comémmorez les morts du decembre 60»” (“Commemorate the dead of December 60”!) (156). He is arrested by French paras during the repression of the 1961 commemoration, and his torture begins at their hands. The episode of torture is not marked or contained by any date in the text. Berkane’s torture exceeds temporal bounds, like an infection; its afterlife lingers ominously into the narrative present of the 1990s, both in Berkane’s troubled consciousness and in the troubled nation to which his consciousness bears a metonymic relation. His pain eludes the new state’s injunction to mourn loss and suffering only as necessary sacrifice to its reasons.

This striking omission of the ‘grève des huit jours’ is neither an oversight nor evidence of Djebar’s failure to endorse militant politics. Her fictional reemployment of these events submits to critique at once the exercise of colonizing force and the sacrificial strategy
of the revolutionary vanguard. By submitting the strike to erasure, *La disparition* creates an opening to recognize lives whose loss would never be mourned or acknowledged by the new nation as anything other than required, if regrettable, sacrifice—if that.

*La disparition* sets loose the unquiet specters of the postcolony. It claims as heroes those disappeared who would never be called ‘martyrs’ (shuhada) by the FLN, the FIS, or the GIA. Before he vanishes, Berkane tells Nadjia about his own father, a Chaoui (Berber) farmer who became a decorated WWII soldier after fighting the Nazis on behalf of France in 1945 only to be arrested, tortured and killed in Algiers in 1961, his teeth extracted one by one by a young French soldier just trying to do his job. Nadjia tells Berkane about her grandfather’s murder—a pharmacist in Oran assassinated 10 October 57 by FLN militants as a bourgeois traitor because he failed to make payments to the movement—and claims that this loss drove her into self-imposed exile and forgetting (see 96-99). Berkane tells the youngfisherman Rachid about the death of his drug-addicted uncle Tchaida, gunned down for stumbling through the streets past the French military curfew and labeled, absurdly, an ‘armed terrorist’ in the next day’s newspaper. Berkane insists that the religious and political honorific ‘moudjahiddin’ has nothing to do with Tchaida:

Tchaida, pour moi, a été le héros pur et nu, un héros malheureux, vulnerable. Par sa lucidité de l’ultime heure, de tous les gens de ma Casbah, il me paraît le seul innocent—pas le héros politique ni même celui du nationalisme : non, en quelque sorte, le héros absolu, lui qui nous a fait à l’avance ses adieux!

(To me, Tchaida was a pure and naked hero, a wretched and vulnerable hero. His lucidity at the final hour made him seem to me as the only innocent one of all the people in my Casbah—not a political or a nationalist hero: no, but an absolute hero, one who gave us his goodbyes before it happened.)

(Djebar LD 80)

Rachid agrees with Berkane’s point, and Rachid calls it like it is, speaking in language signaled to colloquial Arabic even as it appears in *La disparition* as French: “Il y a
quelquechose pourri dans notre revolution” (80). (There is something rotten in our revolution.)

My point is that La disparition’s poetics and form train the imagination to move in ways other than those cultivated by the historiographic and discursive practices of the nation-state, which calculates the loss of certain human lives as necessary sacrifice to its reasons. Here I draw insight from Marc Redfield’s ‘Spectral Life and the Rhetoric of Terror’, in the introduction to The Rhetoric of Terror:

Nationalism limits to its citizenry the anonymous others on whom it acknowledges dependence and marks out this limitation as a wound to be cherished: it is the source of an enmity toward the other and mourning for the self that serves to efface internal difference and generate national identity. Predicated on mourning, nationalism is a device for foreclosing mourning by sublimating the uniqueness and irreparability of each death suffered into the generality of a sacrifice. The specter is that which in death refuses sublimation. (10)

Djebar’s novel lets loose the specters effaced by the project of National Unity. La disparition exposes the grounding object of nationalist desire—that destination to which Berkane yearned to return but could not find (“Ma Casbah, mon antre, ma forteresse, mon quartier, bouma…”) (64)—to be shifting detritus of scraps and wind, no ground to stand on. Djebar’s unorthodox re-employment of Algeria’s recent past disturbs what has come to appear settled and makes visible specters that the state insists should not be seen or grieved. It is a critique of violence—not in the sense of negative evaluation, but rather an act of interpretation that invites critical judgement concerning the structural relationship of violence, the law, and justice. This oppositional, critical rewriting of the nationalist text authorizes mourning that serves no nation.

The open question of who will now inherit Djebar must be asked in the same breath as the question of translation: in what languages will Djebar’s work be read in the future? The title of this novel—La disparition de la langue française—prompts such questions, as does
the recent death of Djebar. Is French disappearing, or at least relinquishing status as language of emancipation? Does Djebar’s French imagine and portend its own afterlife? In her recent reflection on Djebar’s posthumous reception, Madeleine Dobie points out—citing Kamel Daoud11—that the difficult question is not whether Djebar will be read, but whether (and how) she will be read by Algerians:

Djebar will undoubtedly be read in some circles. Her works have been central to the structural transformation by which, since the 1980s, French literature has gradually been reframed as Francophone literature. Her novels are now fixtures of academic syllabi and reading lists, an adoption that began in countries such as United States, the United Kingdom and Germany, and later reached France, where recognition culminated in her election, in 2005, to the Académie française. The more difficult question, as Daoud suggests, is whether she will be read in Algeria, where obituaries testify to a complex mix of belated pride and self-reproach (Why is this world-renowned writer not better known in Algeria? Why aren’t her books taught in schools and universities? Why didn’t the government do more to advance her candidacy for a Nobel Prize?) and indifference tinged with hostility (If I’ve never heard of her maybe it’s because she wrote in French for the French and spent most of her life in Paris…).12

These are questions being asked and answered. Until recently Djebar’s work had been translated into twenty languages, but never into Arabic. In 2014, just before her death, the Algiers-based Editions Sedia published Mohamed Yahiatène’s Arabic translation of Nulle part dans la maison de mon père.13 This was Djebar’s last novel, an interesting place to begin the project of translating her work into Arabic. We might notice that the translated title—Bawabat eddhikrayat—may be read as a response to the novel’s French title: it transforms impasse (“Nowhere in My Father’s House”) into opening (“Doors of Memory”). Sedia has plans to soon publish Arabic translations of two more works by Djebar: Loin de Médine and L’amour, la fantasia, and so Djebar’s subversive critiques of violent nationalism may soon find a way into Arabic. Will they be read? By whom? And how? Future readers will answer these questions.

In 1996, when Djebar won the Neustadt Prize, her fellow novelist Mohammad Dib publicly apologized to her on behalf of Algerian men in general for this dismissal. Dib concludes, “If, by this distinguished Neustadt Prize, Assia Djebar finally sees herself vindicated as an Algerian woman, if she receives as well the prize of such well-merited recognition, we can only regret that this gracious gesture was not made by her own country. But then, how could such a gesture be possible in a land governed by homunculi?”

That is, not as a negative evaluation of violence but rather an exercise of and invitation to judgment and meaningful interpretation. I use these terms in the senses learned from Derrida and Benjamin. To understand Derrida’s *Force of Law* we must read Benjamin’s *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, and to read Benjamin’s we might begin with its title and opening moves, sensitive to the untranslatability of his terms. Derrida points out that the German concept of *Gewalt* is not reducible to that of the French or English *violence* in that *Gewalt* communicates not only illegal violence but also the notion of legitimate, legal, authorized force (see 235). That is to say, in the very word inheres the distinction (violence/force, or unauthorized violence that threatens the existing state vs. authorized violence that preserves it) that is at the heart of both Benjamin’s and Derrida’s essays. More precisely, it is not this *distinction* but rather the ambiguity that is at stake for both Benjamin and Derrida—an ambiguity that calls for judgment that makes distinctions, that calls for *Kritik*. This word helps us to get some clarity on Benjamin’s task (Aufgabe), which is not a negative evaluation of violence but rather an exercise of judgment and meaningful interpretation—a critical, discriminating effort to draw a picture (Darstellung) that correctly places violence (Gewalt), law (recht), and justice (Gerechtigkeit) in a structural relationship (Verhältniss). Benjamin’s essay is organized—and ultimately undone—by a series of distinctions that Derrida handily outlines for us on pages 264-5 of his own essay. We should understand these distinctions, as it is the problem of undecidability that animates both texts, and the matter on which it seems to me that Derrida finally judges Benjamin Who or what authorizes the cut that distinguishes violence that is authorized or justified from violence that is not? What guarantees (or signs, or authorizes) the validity of a judgment that decides between legal and illegal violence? Where in the structural picture is that guarantee located? And where does fiction come into this picture?:

In her 1995 *Le blanc de l’Algérie* (1995), written at the same time as the essay I’m discussing here, Djebar identifies the uncanny repetition of colonizing violence in the structure of the postcolonial state. She figures the repetition as hand-to-hand transfer of infected torture instruments: “Comment, dans Alger, ville noire, s’est opérée la passation entre bourreaux d’hier et ceux d’aujourd’hui?” (How, in Algiers, dark city, does the hand-off happen between yesterday’s butchers and today’s?) (220-221). Many Algerians asked this question in the 1990s: by what deadly operation did the “gris étincelant des instruments métalliques” (glinting grey of metallic instruments) pass from the hand of the former torturer to the hand of the formerly tortured (LB 216)?
5 That Pontecorvo’s *Battle of Algiers* was screened by the Pentagon in 2003 is a clear suggestion that other readings of the Algerian past remain live in the post 9/11 present. Text from the Pentagon’s advertisement flier reads: ‘How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. Children shoot soldiers at point-blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film.’

6 The FLN leader Abane Ramdane was instrumental in forming the UGTA, Algeria’s largest trade union. Founded February 24, 1956, “en pleine guerre de libération, avec l’objectif clairement déclaré de mobiliser les travailleurs pour lutter contre le colonialisme et son injustice,’ the UGTA has broken decisively with the FLN, of which is it critical. These citations is taken from the informative and intriguing official account of the UGTA’s history is available on the union’s website, here: [http://www.ugta.dz/Historique-de-l-UGTA.html#1](http://www.ugta.dz/Historique-de-l-UGTA.html#1).

7 The ‘grève des huit jours’ was timed by its strategists to coincide with the UN debate on the French-Algerian conflict (a conflict that France insisted was a domestic and not international affair, since it considered colonial Algeria a legal part of the French republic and its own counter-revolutionary practices merely ‘police action’ required to preserve the integrity of the republic). The eight-day general strike is usually cited as the collective performance of solidarity and resistance by the Algerian people that rendered the future nation visible on an international stage, and it is also widely understood to be the display of insubordination that provoked the French imperial nation-state to escalate its military operations and to routinize its widespread technique of torture during the urban guerilla war now known as the Battle of Algiers.

8 The FLN and the FIS have already been discussed; the GIA is the armed wing of the FIS. It is called, in Arabic, *al-Jama'ah al-Islamiyah al-Musallaha*, acronym from the French *Groupe Islamique Armée*.

9 Consider such imagery: “Maisons entre des zones d’éboulis, vieilles demeures en ruines et ces ruines commencent à dormir sous des détritus, pyramides parfois incontournables de déchets et de fiente, quelques rues au cœur même de ce vieil Alger, avec un côté entier disparu, comme pour laisser la place au vent” (Houses among zones strewn with fallen rocks, old homes in ruins and these ruins beginning to sleep beneath the sometimes inescapable detritus, pyramids of scraps and droppings, some streets in the very heart of old Algiers with an entire side disappeared as if to give way to the wind.) (Djebar LD 66).

10 From the Introduction to Marc Redfield’s *The Rhetoric of Terror*, ‘Spectral Life and the Rhetoric of Terror’: “Nationalism is our culture’s most potent mechanism for disavowing that fundamental dependency by, after a fashion, acknowledging it. Nationalism limits to its citizenry the anonymous others on whom it acknowledges dependence and marks out this limitation as a wound to be cherished: it is the source of an enmity toward the other and mourning for the self that serves to efface internal difference and generate national identity. Predicated on mourning, nationalism is a device for foreclosing mourning by sublimating the
uniqueness and irreparability of each death suffered into the generality of a sacrifice. The specter is that which in death refuses sublimation. The specter, as a revenant, is a figure for or reiteration of iterability, yet the whole point, often insufficiently stressed in accounts of Derridean deconstruction, is that the specter returns because it is singular: because its life, figure, and voice are utterly irreplaceable. To affirm eirenic cosmopolitanism is to affirm that we are more vulnerable than we know and that we are haunted by voices, faces, and vulnerabilities that elude not only all documentation or border controls but indeed all recompense or acknowledgment. That is why they lay claim to us” (10).

11 Dobie cites from Kamel Daoud’s public Facebook page: “Assia Djebar ne donnera son nom qu’à sa propre tombe en Algérie ; sauf pour ceux qui veulent encore donner la vie en rouvrant ses livres là où le pays se ferme” [Assia Djebar’s name will appear in Algeria only on her own tomb, except for those who want still want to bring (her to) life by opening her books while the country closes on itself]. La Chronique de Kamel Daoud, February 9, 2015: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=1388674348030279&story_fbid=1596828443881534


13 I thank Nacéra Khiat, editor at Sedia, for discussing this information with me and for providing copies of the translation. Sedia also published the first Algerian edition of the collection Lire Assia Djebar! (2015; “Read Assia Djebar!”), edited by Amel Chaouati under the auspices of the Cercle des Amis d’Assia Djebar (originally published by Cheminante in 2012).
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